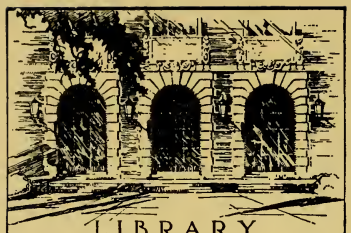

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MARY BROWNE

THIRD VOLUME

MARY BROWNE

BY

L. E. WILTON

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

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1880

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MARY BROWNE.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Six months passed away, and the marriage-day of Mr. Harrop and Marion Launceston was fixed.

I have almost involuntarily written this sentence without relating the events of these six months; but for the lucid continuation of this history they must be detailed, or, in any case, touched upon slightly. Shortly after the conversation narrated in the last chapter, I had heard that at the end of five weeks from the date of their marriage Mr. and Mrs. Graeme were expected at 'The Laurels.' Six, seven, eight weeks elapsed, and they did not make their appearance. Then Mr. Harrop left

home for a week, to meet them I imagined, but he returned without them. I heard no remarks made on the subject by anyone. I saw little, indeed next to nothing, of Marion Launceston, and when we met even she made no comment on the absence of the, at all events, once-expected visitors. Mr. Harrop's natural reserve and silence appeared to me to have increased. Even to myself, to whom he had ever been kind and thoughtful in his manner, he had become indifferent and absent. If he met me casually, a quick 'Good-day, Miss Browne,' was the only greeting he vouchsafed. I knew something must be wrong, but what the trouble was, even whether it really concerned Fanny and Mr. Graeme or not, was a mystery to me.

Christmas came, and a dull, miserable Christmas it was, to me at least. There was plenty of gaiety downstairs, in which I was occasionally invited to join, though I rarely accepted the offer. When I did, I remember that the interest Mrs. Chanter appeared

to take in it all seemed to me to be assumed, and it struck me that she assumed it in order to deceive the world concentrated in a circle of so many miles round 'The Laurels.' More especially as in all this gaiety Mr. Harrop was grave. The shadow on his face was visible even when he smiled.

The Christmas festivities at length subsided; but the children, who had gone to spend the latter portion of their holidays with some cousins or other relations, were still absent. For the last fortnight I had been much alone, even without an occasional visit from Marion, for she too was away.

It was a bright, cold morning in January. I dressed myself for a walk, and going into the schoolroom from my bedroom ready equipped, I saw that Mr. Harrop was standing at the window looking out. He turned round upon hearing my step.

'Good morning, Miss Browne. I beg your pardon. I suppose I must have imagined you to be already enjoying the fresh

air; for, passing the open door of your *sanctum* on my way downstairs, my eye caught your window, and I came in thoughtlessly just to see how the morning looked from it.'

'Pray stay,' I said; 'I'm not out yet, but I'm just going, as you see.'

'Don't hurry away on my account,' he answered, laughing at my speech. 'I seem never to see or speak to you now.' He looked at me as he spoke from head to foot. 'You appear warm and comfortable, at all events. I have been thinking the last few moments,' he went on, after an almost imperceptible pause, 'how lonely and dull you must sometimes feel here all by yourself.'

'I am sometimes so,' I said; 'but I am accustomed to solitude, and I read a great deal.'

'You should not have had such dull Christmas evenings,' he went on, with an unusual hesitation in his manner, 'if it had not been—well, I hardly know what I was about to say—I suppose there are some

combinations of circumstances in which we cannot but accept the existing state of things.'

I had never observed in him till that moment any resemblance to his sister; but these words were uttered in the very tone she ordinarily assumed when protesting against anything of which she disapproved, and the expression on his face was exactly similar to one which I had many times seen on hers. There was a kind of impatient anger in it. I affected not to notice the latter part of his speech, and simply assured him I had felt very happy by myself; adding that his remarks were hardly flattering to me considering that, since Christmas, I had spent two evenings in his society, which he appeared to have forgotten entirely. The puzzled and amused look that grew upon his countenance as I finished my statement made me laugh gaily.

'I'm fit for nothing,' he said, joining in my merriment; 'I'd forgotten it all. I recollect now seeing your meek face in the

drawing-room one evening at least. You must pardon me. I am glad,' he added, 'to find you so cheerful. Do you know as you entered the room I saw such a shade of melancholy on your face, that my heart misgave me, and a feeling of self-reproach came over me when I recollected I had promised to befriend you, and you had probably been left for many days to your own society, with no social voices and faces to keep you company.'

'I like my own society so well,' I answered, 'that I have felt quite happy in it. You must not think me a pining, discontented person. I am nothing of the sort, I assure you.'

'No, I should not imagine you to be so. Well, after all, there is no happiness like that which a peaceful mind and clear conscience brings—the happiness which is independent of external circumstances—that is yours I know. But still it must be hard for you, poor girl, to be shut out from so many

pleasures natural to your age, and to be so dependent upon yourself for amusement.'

'It is not hard,' I said; 'I am contented, and that is everything. I shall never be happier than I am now.'

'Time will prove that,' he answered, smiling. 'I trust the best years of your life are yet to come. Have you plenty of books to read?'

'Yes, at present. I get them from the library in the village.'

'A grand selection, no doubt. There are plenty more readable, I should think, in my study, if you like to look over them. You have *carte-blanche*. Go in whenever you like, and take what you please.'

I thanked him gratefully.

'There is no need to thank me,' he said. 'I am glad to have this opportunity of telling you that, if it were in my power to do so, I should be delighted to render your life here much more pleasant than it is. I have no doubt with regard to your evenings they have

been, if solitary, quite as healthy and enjoyable—perhaps much more so—as they would have been if spent in my sister's drawing-room. But still I wish I could remedy for you several existing evils.'

'There are none to remedy, I assure you. I have quite enjoyed my holidays; and when the children are at home I make myself happy with them and my duties. Now,' I added, 'I am losing my walk and taking up your time this bright morning, so I will say good-bye.' As I spoke I put out my hand timidly. He took it in his own, and looked at me earnestly for a moment.

'Good-bye,' he said, without expressing any wish to detain me. 'I wish I were more like you in your splendid capacity for enjoyment of the present.'

As I left the room I saw him turn to the window and again look out, watching the view; and as I closed the door I heard him sigh heavily. I little thought how soon I should be enabled to form some sort of

opinion as to the reason of the strange gloom which oppressed him.

That afternoon Fanny Graeme came home. I was sitting in the schoolroom reading quietly, when I heard a carriage come up the drive. Wondering who the visitor could be, as the hour for 'calls' had hardly arrived, I walked to the window and looked out, just to gratify the idle curiosity of the moment. The vehicle turned out to be merely a close fly, with but one occupant, a lady. When the servant had alighted and opened the door, I saw that this lady was Fanny Graeme.

Some strange alteration in her face struck me even at that distance, and at the very first moment I caught sight of it. I could not quite make out how it was changed. It had lost none of its roundness or beauty of any kind; and yet there seemed a sad change in it which instantly affected me painfully. As she neared the house the door was opened before the man could knock, as though the

fly had been seen coming up the drive—I could hear a confused noise as of sobs and cries, hushed almost instantly; then the shutting of doors, and all was silent.

I sat about twenty minutes, thinking, wondering as to the reason of what I felt must be the young bride's unexpected return, and whether her husband would follow her presently. In the midst of my wonder and cogitations the door of the study opened and a servant entered. I saw by her serious look that something was wrong.

'Will you go down to the drawing-room at once, please, Miss. Mr. Harrop wishes to see you.'

With my heart beating quickly, too startled to question the girl who had brought the message, I obeyed orders instantly. As I entered the room to which I had been directed to repair, I saw that Mrs. Graeme was seated on a couch with her arm thrown on the back of it, and her face hidden on her arm, and Mr. Harrop was standing near, looking at

her. Mrs. Chanter was in her easy chair reading, or apparently reading, with her face turned towards her daughter, but her eyes fixed on the book in her hand. The instant I had closed the door behind me Mr. Harrop spoke.

'Miss Browne,' he said, 'I have sent for you to request you to act towards my niece the part of a sister. Will you, at my urgent entreaty, attend to her wants, and endeavour to restore her to, at least, something like composure?'

Utterly bewildered, I nevertheless obeyed without delay. I crossed the room to Mrs. Graeme, and laid my hand on her arm.

'What is the matter?' I said; 'what can I do for you? Raise your head a moment and speak to me—I am Mary Browne, you know.'

She neither moved nor answered.

'Mrs. Chanter,' I said, turning suddenly round, but still keeping my hand where I had placed it, 'will you tell me what ails

your daughter? In what way can I help her?'

She raised her eyes slowly and looked at me for a moment with a gaze as calm as that with which she had previously favoured her book.

'I have nothing to do with all this, Miss Browne, and nothing to say, except that I am almost as much surprised and annoyed at your most unwelcome and unladylike intrusion here as I am at that of Mrs. Graeme.'

This was re-assuring, at all events. I made no reply, but, turning again to the unhappy girl before me, was about to address her for the second time, when she started suddenly, shook off my hand, sat up on the couch, and began sobbing violently.

'Keep away, uncle,' she screamed, as Mr. Harrop went towards her. 'Don't come near me. You can't alter things, and I won't be talked to and lectured.'

'Fanny,' he said, 'I ask you for the last time to listen to me for a moment. Remember your parting words to myself on that

most unhappy occasion when you gave up your home in this house. You told me then that henceforth, if consistent with your duty to your husband, you would make it your study to obey my every wish. Those words were not lightly spoken, though Heaven forbid I should require or expect you to redeem them to their fullest extent. This is the first, and may be the last, instance in which I shall request you to remember them. You must obey me to-day in all things. First, go upstairs with Miss Browne, bathe your face—in fact, make yourself look like the lady you do not look now; lie down and rest for an hour or so, and when you have recovered from your fatigue come down here to me.'

'And then, uncle?'

'And then,' he answered, trying to smile, 'you shall have some tea. Go now.'

'And then, uncle?'

He made no reply.

'And then, uncle? I know what you mean, though you won't say,' she broke out

passionately. 'I won't do it. You'll never make me do it.'

'And then,' he interrupted, sternly, 'you will set off at once on your return journey to your husband.'

'I will not,' she screamed.

'You will set off instantly,' he repeated in precisely the same tone as before, 'on your return journey to your husband.'

'I will not. If he wants me back he can come here and beg me to go with him.'

'He will not have time to do so.'

'Not have—time?'

'No. Before he can return to find his wife has left him she will be back in his home, ready to meet him. Now, not a word. Oblige me by going upstairs at once with your friend.'

'She's no friend of mine.'

'Never mind; go with her.'

She returned his look for a moment with one as steady as his own. Then her eyes dropped and she turned to me.

'If I'm ordered out of the room, and you're ordered to go with me, why don't you come?'

'I'm quite ready,' I said. Then she threw herself again on the sofa, buried her face in her hands, and sobbed and cried.

Mr. Harrop stood still, silently watching her. Doubtless he knew how to manage her better than I had given him credit for, for while I was trying to decide whether it was best to endeavour to rouse her or not she suddenly dried her tears, started up from the sofa, and walked hurriedly from the room, without once glancing round. Obeying a look from Mr. Harrop, I followed her in silence. She went upstairs, entering the room which had once been her own. She waited at the door for me also to go in, and when I had done so she shut and locked it. Then, without bestowing any further notice on myself, she threw herself on the floor, rested her head on a chair, and cried again.

CHAPTER XXXII.

I WATCHED for some time in silence; then, recollecting Mr. Harrop's wishes, advanced and spoke.

'Mrs. Graeme,' I said, 'would it not be better to follow your uncle's directions?' She took no heed of my words, but continued weeping as though she had not heard me speak.

'Mrs. Graeme,' I said again, 'let me entreat you to compose yourself. It grieves me to see you so unhappy, and so determined not to be comforted.'

She lifted her head now.

'I don't care,' she said, with her little teeth firmly set. 'They shall see that I don't care. I hate them all!'

There was a pettish childishness in her voice and manner that made me almost unable to realise that this was positively a woman who had left her husband after a few months of married life—and not some silly girl, fretting idly about some mere every-day trouble. A greater contempt mingled with my pity than I had ever experienced for her before.

'If you want me to bathe my face,' she said, 'why don't you pour out some water? How can I wash without water?'

My cheeks flushed, but recollecting who spoke, and who had charged me to assist her, I obeyed her wish. She rose and bathed her face, and then, advancing to the looking-glass on the dressing-table, stood before it, examining herself closely. Then she unfastened her hair, and it fell in loose, bright masses over her shoulders. She gazed at the reflection of herself for some time, admiringly, through all her tears, then turning away with a weary gesture, threw herself

on the bed, and in a few moments had sobbed herself to sleep.

I looked upon her, and wondered. Was the wilful course of action she had taken only one of the childish acts which formed a portion of the result of her weak unreasoning mind, or had some sudden discovery, or misfortune of some kind, in connection with her husband, given her a tangible excuse for her hasty conduct? Was he indeed the madman I still, at times, suspected him to be? Had she unexpectedly learned and realised that it was so when too late to escape, and become overpowered with terror and despair? A moment's reflection taught me how unlikely it was that such could be the case. Were it so, her uncle would at once, doubtless, have taken her under his protection, and refused to allow her to return to her home, instead of urging her to do so. No —it was of no use to speculate. It was a mystery, and only time would explain it to me, if, indeed, it were ever explained to me

at all. I turned again, and watched the unconscious sleeper, who lay motionless, breathing as calmly and placidly as an innocent child. At the expiration of an hour, not knowing whether I had better rouse her or not, I left the room as noiselessly as possible, went downstairs, and knocked at the door of the drawing-room. There was no answer, so I went in. Mr. Harrop was walking backwards and forwards in the verandah, with his arms folded, evidently in deep thought; but he looked up on my entrance, and spoke directly.

'Is she asleep?'

'Yes; she has been asleep an hour. I thought I had better come and tell you.'

'Stay a moment, Miss Browne.'

I closed the door behind me and waited.

'Margaret.'

She did not raise her eyes from the book she was reading, or affecting to read, or show in any way her consciousness of having been addressed. She must have been acting, but

she acted so well, and kept down all manifestation of excitement with such determination, that even I, who thought I knew her power in that particular, wondered.

'Margaret, will you listen to me for a moment?'

'I am listening.' Still with her eyes on her book, and without turning towards him, or acknowledging his presence in any way but by her words.

'Your child is asleep upstairs. Will you go to her, that on her awaking you may speak to her as only her mother can speak to her at such a moment as the present?'

She raised her head now, and looked at him steadily for an instant.

'I have nothing to do with this, Charles. It is no affair of mine. Why do you trouble me with it?'

'Nothing to do with it?' he exclaimed—'Nothing to do with it, Madam? Are you not her mother?'

'I have nothing to do with it,' she re-

peated. 'My daughter has a husband now. She is independent of me in every way. Her conduct is his business—not mine. One thing I know, and that is, that, with my consent, this house does not shelter her now, and would not have sheltered her for a moment. Are you lost to all sense of propriety and right feeling,' she added suddenly, rising as she spoke, and facing him with the angry passion she had so long repressed breaking out at last—'are you lost to all sense of the opinion of the world, that you affect not to see that your niece's conduct this day will make Me and my family the talking-stock of the place?'

He looked at her for a moment with an expression I had never before seen in his face, and never saw there afterwards. He moved his lips as if about to address her again, but checked himself and turned to me.

'Miss Browne, when Mrs. Graeme awakes, will you kindly induce her to come downstairs. Do not disturb her just yet—but in

no case allow her to sleep later than half-past five.'

I signified assent, and returned to the bedroom. My unhappy charge was still lying as I had left her, calm and still. I sat by the bed till nearly the time her uncle had limited as the duration of her rest, and was just preparing to arouse her, when she opened her eyes. Raising herself on her arm, she stared round the room for a few seconds, as if bewildered, then appearing to awake to a full consciousness of her position, she left the bed, and walking to the mirror (without taking any notice of me, though I saw she perceived I was present), began, in silence, to arrange her hair. This took some little time. When it was completed to her satisfaction, she ceased her admiring glances, and after washing her hands carefully, not forgetting the minor details of glycerine and rose-water, &c., came across the room, and stood before me.

'I am quite ready to go down, Miss

Browne. Are your orders to go with me?'

Still the same pettish manner. Manifestly her sleep had not improved her temper.

'Your uncle requested me to go down when you did.'

'Then why don't you come? What's the good of wasting your time in looking at me?'

I led the way to the drawing-room in silence. As we entered, I saw that Mr. Harrop had resumed his walk up and down the verandah. Mrs. Chanter had again her eyes fixed on her book.

'Are you better, Fanny?' asked the former, advancing to meet us.

'I haven't been ill,' she answered sullenly.

'Where are your hat and—and the rest of your out-door dress?'

'Upstairs. I can get them presently, if I want them,' she added, changing colour.

'Very good. Now sit down, and take some refreshment.'

He placed a chair for her at the table, on which tea and cold meat had been placed.

'Margaret, will you not join us?'

'When people force their way, uninvited, to my table, I have no alternative but to absent myself from it.'

'Miss Browne, may I beg you to preside?'

I obeyed orders, taking the seat I imagined to be usually Mrs. Chanter's, and feeling very strange aud uncomfortable. Mr. Harrop also sat down, and while I busied myself with the teapot, carved the meat, and placing some before his niece, invited her to eat. She did so in silence. He watched her closely during the progress of the meal. She, on her part, did not honour him with a single glance. When she had finished her tea, which I noticed she seemed to enjoy thoroughly, she placed her knife and fork neatly on her plate, rose from the table, and walked to the window.

'Miss Browne, may I ask you to be so

very kind as to fetch down Mrs. Graeme's walking dress ?'

'I can fetch it myself, uncle.'

'I must request you to stay here.'

She acquiesced, but with a deepening of the sullen look on her face. I fancy she had contemplated locking herself up or otherwise combating the circumstances of the moment, and he suspected it. I left the room, and in a few moments returned with the clothes.

'Now Fanny, dress directly.'

She obeyed at once, though trembling now, and beginning to cry. I pitied her very much—I could not help pitying her. When her toilette, which she performed at a pier-glass very carefully, and with the aid of a little pocket-comb and brush, was nearly completed, her uncle turned from his quiet observation of her, and rang the bell.

'The carriage is waiting ?'

'Yes, sir. You ordered it for six o'clock.'

'Quite right.' The girl left the room, closing the door.

'Now Fanny, are you ready?'

Her only reply was to seat herself on a couch, and settle her face into a most determined expression.

'Do not distress me by again behaving in this childish manner,' continued her uncle. 'Go to your mother and say good-bye.'

'I will not,' she said.

He bent his head and whispered in her ear. She looked at him with a half-defiant expression for a moment, and then, rising, went to Mrs. Chanter, who still kept her eyes on her book, though I had noticed that since the re-entrance of her daughter she had not, at all events while I had been present, turned a leaf.

'Good-bye, mamma.'

No answer.

'Do you hear, mamma? Good-bye.'

Still no reply and no change of expression. She did not move nor raise her eyes. The poor girl turned to her uncle—'There,' she said, 'I knew she wouldn't

speak to me. Why do you tell me to do such things?'

'You have done your duty,' he answered. 'Now come with me.'

She moved away without another word, and never looking again at her mother, much less taking the slightest notice of me, opened the door for herself, and left the room.

'You must excuse her, Miss Browne. There is every excuse to be made for her.'

As he spoke he passed me, and followed his niece hastily. Scarcely knowing what course to take, after a moment's hesitation, I went after him into the hall.

'Now, Fanny, say good-bye to Miss Browne, and thank her.'

'I have nothing to thank her for,' she answered in the old sullen tone.

He looked so hurt, and, in spite of everything, I pitied her so much, that, in the impulse of the moment, I took her hand in mine and kissed her.

'Good-bye,' I said. 'I hope you will be happier soon.'

She turned away, trying to control her sobs, but did not reply, nor respond to my action in any way. Her uncle watched her with an earnest, pitying expression, as she went down the steps and took her seat in the carriage. Then he turned to me.

'Good-bye, Miss Browne,' he said kindly, putting out his hand. 'You must let me thank you, not only for myself, but on the part of this mistaken and unhappy girl.'

'You have nothing to thank me for, indeed.'

He raised his hat, and going down the steps, took his seat by his niece. I waited till the carriage had disappeared, and seeing that there was no servant near, closed the door myself, and turned to go upstairs.

As I passed the drawing-room, I saw that the door of that apartment had also been left open, and recollecting that I myself had been the delinquent, I advanced to remedy

my error. As I did so, my eyes met in a mirror the reflection of a woman seated in an easy chair, with a book in her hand, on which her eyes were intently fixed. I closed the door softly, and feeling more uncomfortable than ever, went on my way.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

It was two months after the occurrences mentioned in the last chapter. The fresh beauty of spring mantled the earth like a fair garment. All nature was radiant with returning youth; and under the sweet influence of the season the dreary winter in my heart seemed changing into something like cheerfulness. At all events, there was no deep pain now. I had taught myself, for a time, at least—for ever, I thought—not to long hopelessly for that which I felt could never be.

Marion Launceston had returned home some weeks previously. But though I knew that soon after her arrival the one thing which had been wanting to change into certainty a suspicion I had long entertained had

happened—though I knew that Mr. Harrop had asked her to be his wife—yet it had had no power to disturb the quiet resignation which had already begun in my heart. I did not envy my friend. I felt no anger, nor pain, nor jealousy. 'She is to be with him always,' I said to myself; 'and even if it were not to be so, he would still love her.' I felt it all, when I did feel it, only as one feels a long-healed wound, which, at certain moments, must still cause its victim an incurable but mitigated agony.

Her face had changed the last few weeks. A shadow had come over it, which it had never worn before; a look unlike that which one expects to see on the face of a woman beloved as she was beloved, and who returns the affection. Her old gay manner was gone entirely, and a sadness was in its place which pained me. I could not explain to myself the reason of the misgiving—if I may call it so—which I felt when I looked at her. 'It is natural,' I said, endeavouring to reassure

myself, 'that in the contemplation of the life before her she should feel grave and thoughtful. It is natural that she should put away girlishness and girlish things, and ponder often on the path she has chosen for herself.' But still I could not understand the expression of her face. It was too serious and anxious. It was not the face of a happy woman.

I had seen little of her since the arrangement of her future had been made known to me. She had not avoided me—on the contrary, she had appeared to seek my society—and yet we had seldom met, and no opportunity had occurred for private conversation between us. Twice or thrice we had planned a meeting at her own house, but on each occasion some unforeseen circumstance had prevented its taking place. At one time Mrs. Chanter had 'set her heart upon the dear girl spending the evening at "The Laurels;" at another, the night was too wet for me to venture out so far. And so

the days passed, and we never spoke together; but I watched the shadow deepen day by day, and I wondered and pitied; and then tried again to argue with myself that my fancy had destroyed my judgment, and that the shadow was no shadow—nothing but the earnest look which beautifies the face of a woman whose heart is full of a serious, newly-born happiness.

In spite of the fair hope which had dawned for one of its members there was still trouble in the household. I seldom saw Mrs. Chanter, and when I did her face invariably wore its old expression of indifference to things in general; but that look did not deceive me. I knew intuitively it was assumed to impose upon the world at large, and any individual in particular who happened to think her countenance worthy of close observation. Her brother I met occasionally, and he always appeared to me more grave and thoughtful than ever. I always associated his changed look with the position of

his niece, and no doubt correctly. Since the night I had last seen that young lady her name had not been mentioned in my hearing by any member of the household, with the exception of the children. They often wondered aloud 'why Fanny was so long away, and why that unkind Willie Graeme kept her so shut up, and never let her come home and see them all.' Nellie even went so far as to inform me that one day, upon her troubling her mamma with a question on the subject, the only reply of that exemplary parent was to order her to leave the room instantly; since which, my little pupil assured me, with more force than elegance, 'she had taken good care to hold her tongue.'

It was a bright day at the beginning of April. I had already commenced my spring custom of walking out with the children directly after breakfast; and, in accordance with this practice, by nine o'clock on this particular morning we were sauntering out at the front door, all prepared to enjoy our

hour of leisure. As we were starting a quick whistle sounded through the hall.

'It's Uncle Charles, Miss Browne. May I go back to him?'

'Certainly,' I answered.

'You needn't come, Aura,' he called out. 'I am coming to you. Wait a moment.' By the sound of his voice I heard that he was in the library, the door of which had been open when we passed it; and in another moment he emerged from that room, hat in hand.

'You are going my way, Aura, so we may as well all go together.'

She ran up to and stopped him half-way in the hall. 'How do you know that, Uncle Charles?'—lifting up her head to be kissed, an example which her sister hastened to follow—'How do you know which way we are going?'

'Well, *I* am going *your* way, then. Is that better, my sharp little friend?'

'Which means to say, you are determined

to go with us, and are willing to put yourself out of the way to do so.'

'You flatter yourself, I assure you. It so happens that my destination can be reached by taking either the left or the right road; therefore, as you also must necessarily take either the one or the other—and it is unmaterial to me whether I decide upon the shorter or the longer route, provided I arrive safely at the before-mentioned destination—it is easy to be understood that at least I have no intention of inconveniencing myself in order to have the satisfaction of enjoying your charming society! Ahem!'

'But you prefer it to solitude, though!'

'That you are welcome to conclude, madam, if such a course is any gratification to you. I merely wish you to understand that I am neither leaving the house nor turning from a purpose simply for the pleasure of walking with you. I hope you do not mistake me. Good morning, Miss Browne,' he added, coming towards the door, and nodding

kindly to me. 'You must excuse my conduct; but Aura's almost a match for me already, and I felt compelled to put her down slightly before I even did myself the honour of speaking to you. I presume I'm at liberty to walk down the road with you?'

'Oh, yes, certainly,' I answered.

'Now we're off, then. It's a long time since I've had the pleasure of seeing you,' he continued, looking at me more closely, 'except for a hurried "Good day."'

'Yes, it's a long time,' I said.

'You haven't done what you said you'd do, uncle, the last time you were out with us and Miss Browne.'

'What was that, Aura?'

'Why, you've not been to the schoolroom—you know—and——'

'Well, and what? I'm all in the dark.'

'And told us—you know, uncle.'

'I don't indeed.'

'And told us about Miss——'

'Miss who?'

'Why, Miss Launceston.'

'Oh! Miss Launceston.'

'Yes.'

'Well, what about her?'

'Why, what you said. You know you said you'd come to the schoolroom and tell us about—about—your arrangements. You can't have forgotten——'

'Well, I recollect now, Aura—that's certain. You had better conclude I should have kept my word had not the matter slipped entirely from my memory, Mind, I don't say I should have done so; only—only you are quite at liberty to think that I should. That's the best way to put it, perhaps.'

'What slipped from your memory, Uncle Charles? The arrangement with Miss Launceston?'

'No,' he answered, laughing, but with something like a blush on his face—'not that. You are a little too sharp, Miss Aura. I refer merely to the promise made to you concerning it.'

'Well, you needn't trouble to perform it now, uncle, for everyone's known all about the affair this long time. I should have spoken to you, ages ago, on the subject,' added this precocious young lady, 'but this is the first private opportunity I've had the pleasure of securing.'

'Indeed, madam!'

'Yes. And I may as well tell you now that both Nellie and myself are anticipating the expected event with the greatest delight. We intend to have capital fun, don't we, Nellie?'

That young lady signified assent, with dancing eyes, and her irrepressible sister for once relapsed into silence.

'You've not seen Miss Launceston lately, have you, Miss Browne?' This from Mr. Harrop, after a scarcely perceptible pause.

'Not to speak to. That is—I mean not alone.'

'She looks ill—does she not?'

'She looks grave, I think, but not ill.'

'*Not* ill?'

'I think she seems well in health; but certainly altered in some way. To me, at least, she seems different.'

'How so?' he asked.

'She's so quiet, and—reserved.'

'Reserved!' he said. 'Surely not that?'

'It is not her nature to be so with those for whom she has any affection,' I replied; 'though she is certainly so now with me. But I have seen so little of her lately,' I added, coldly. 'Perhaps, after all, she herself is unconscious of any change in her manner towards me.'

'Perhaps so,' he answered, in a tone as distant as that which I had adopted.

'He cannot bear to hear a word against her,' I thought, forgetting that that was but natural. 'She is making him like me less and less. Even the careless interest he took in me is wearing off.' And I thought of my friend with a bitterness which I took no pains to mitigate. We walked on in silence till the

corner of the road leading to Mr. Launceston's house came in view.

'Miss Browne, I never thanked you for so kindly obliging me—that evening. You know when I mean,' he added, hesitating. His tone, though more cordial than before, had still a shade of constraint; and, with a wretched feeling of discontent, I resented it.

'I don't at all know what you mean,' I answered. 'I don't remember doing anything to oblige you.'

He looked at me in apparent surprise, but I made no further remark.

'Do you not?' he said. 'I wish I could as easily forget the cause of my appeal to your kindness as you have forgotten your own goodness.'

I did not reply to this, being by this time in no pleasant mood. He took no more notice of me, but walked on calmly by my side, looking straight before him, evidently deep in thought. The children, doubtless tired of our society, had been for some

minutes running races and chasing each other up and down the road. In the absence of conversation I had no resource but my own miserable thoughts, and I walked on sulkily, feeling more and more wretched as each moment passed. At length we arrived at the point where I knew our paths must diverge, if my companion was going to visit Marion; for I was determined not to pass her house. He turned down the road without speaking, not only, evidently, intending to call upon her, but apparently imagining that I intended following in his footsteps.

'Good morning, Mr. Harrop.'

'Where are you going?' he asked, suddenly breaking from his reverie. 'Are you not coming? That is, will you not spend a few minutes with your friend? I can answer that she would share your pleasure—if, indeed, it would be a pleasure to you to see her.'

'No—not this morning.'

'Oh! Good-bye, then. Good-bye, little ones.'

'What for, Uncle Charles?' cried Aura, running up to him. 'Aren't you coming all the way with us?'

'You do not take the same road as myself. I am going to Mr. Launceston's, and Miss Browne wishes you to keep on over the fields. We must obey orders, you know.'

Miss Aura pouted visibly, but made no verbal remonstrance. 'Good-bye, then, Uncle Charles.'

'Good-bye, my pet. Good-bye, Nellie. Have you any message for Miss Launceston, Miss Browne?'

'None, whatever,' I said; 'unless you like to give her my love, which I always regard as a silly message for one person to send to another.'

'I think you're right,' he said; 'but, at all events, I'll not forget to give it. Good morning.'

He raised his hat, and was gone.

There had been, to the last, a tinge of constraint in his tone. 'He thinks me out

of temper,' I said to myself; 'but he may think what he likes. I care nothing.' But I did care. I cared a great deal; though I tried to argue myself into an even more unreasonable frame of mind than I already was in possession of, in order to justify myself in my own sight.

'He thinks no woman worth talking to but Marion,' I said. 'In his eyes I am now as fickle and childish as his own niece. But what is that to me? Nothing—absolutely nothing.' But the more I pondered and argued with myself the greater my trouble seemed to become; and, arrived home, I stole a few minutes before lessons began to shed the bitterest tears that had fallen from my eyes for many weeks. 'Though he loved her,' I said, 'as man never yet loved woman, yet why should he give up his old liking for me? He has now no thought but for her—he sees no beauty but in her face—hears nothing pleasant but the sound of her voice; she has made all other

voices dull and tuneless to him, and the words they utter meaningless. All his old interest in me has passed away.'

I never asked myself whether it was not possible that, unable to comprehend the cause of my sudden abruptness, he had thought it kinder not to force his remarks upon me than to continue to talk to me, to my evident annoyance. In lieu of this I made up a little romance, in which I stood out as a hardly-used, unjustly-treated heroine, the victim of two selfish individuals who thought of no one but themselves. All that evening I sat in the schoolroom nursing my grievance and enjoying myself thoroughly; as people ordinarily do enjoy themselves when under the impression that others are striving to injure them. But my interesting occupation was at length brought to an abrupt termination by the entrance of a servant with a note addressed to myself, which she handed to me. I opened it, and read as follows:—

'Dearest Mary,

'Charles says that during his little walk with you this morning he noticed how pale and ill you looked. He said you were so unlike yourself that it grieved him to see you. Do come here to-morrow evening and talk to me. Charles has given me back my promise to spend it at "The Laurels" on purpose that you may accede to my request; so nothing must prevent your doing so. Refuse at your peril. As early as possible, mind, and no excuses.

'MARION.'

And so my romance ended, and my ill-temper vanished, and I contented myself for the time by deciding out of hand that, whatever happened, I could never be happy again.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE next evening I went. She was alone in her little room, and received me with so much of her old gay manner that I felt happier for the moment than I had been for many days.

'So you are come at last, my darling. I thought we should never meet again.'

'And if we had not,' I answered, kissing her, 'you have much to make up for it, Marion.'

'That's not fair,' she said, smiling. 'One piece of happiness ought not to entail the loss of another. If it were necessarily so, no happiness would be worth seeking.'

'Yours appears to come unsought,' I said; 'mine will not.'

'But perhaps it will for the seeking.'

'Yes,' I said, 'no doubt; and I seek it in books, and in continued employment. I always find——'

She looked at me earnestly as I spoke, and then interrupted me with a burst of laughter.

'Why, this is just what Mr. Harrop said. He told me you had grown suddenly inexplicable, and he couldn't make you out.'

'Make me out,' I said, 'make me out, indeed! He seemed to want to "make me out," as he calls it. He walked the whole distance from "The Laurels" to your corner, and did not utter twenty words. He had some one to think of, Marion, and therefore did not want anyone else to talk to.'

She looked grave for a moment, and then went on in the same light tone.

'If you were not my own true Mary,' she said, 'the little friend whom I loved in her troubled school-days, and whom I love so dearly now, I should say——'

'Well, what would you say?'

'Well, I should say that—that you were out of temper.'

'No, I'm not that,' I said, now thoroughly ashamed of myself; 'only I'm unhappy, and perhaps I sometimes feel hurt when there is no real cause for being so.'

'Unhappy?' she said. 'Why should you be unhappy?'

'There are many things to make me so, of which you know nothing,' I answered. 'Have I much to make me happy, do you think?'

'Certainly not; but equally certainly you have nothing—at least nothing known to myself—to make you absolutely unhappy. You would tell me at once if you had any real trouble, would you not, Mary?'

I could hardly, with my utmost striving, stay the bitter answer that rose to my lips. After a pause I spoke.

'Is it not enough,' I said, calmly, 'that I have no home, no friends, and no hope? That this life which I lead now—this life,

which at times in its loneliness makes me wish for death, will, in all probability, last till the death I so often long for really comes? Is it not enough——'

'Oh! Mary,' she interrupted, 'you must not talk like this.'

'No,' I said; 'you are right. It is best to be silent. Such words are meaningless to you. In your position the realities of which I speak are impossible to you to suffer; perhaps, therefore, impossible to you to believe in.'

'It is not that,' she said. 'I know what you mean, but I cannot bear to hear you say you are so unhappy. It is only what you think *now*, Mary, is it not? You do not always feel so?'

'Always—always,' I said.

'But you generally seem so cheerful and contented.'

'Yes, when I am with you. For the only real pleasure I have is to see your face; to talk with you alone, as we are talking

now. Do you think I can feel happy shut up from morning till night, from day to day, from week to week, with a couple of silly children? No one to speak to, no one to feel for or with me, no one to care really whether I live or die.'

'Oh, Mary!'

'Is it to be wondered at,' I went on, 'that when I see you, who profess to care for me (though it is impossible to one as happy as you are, even with all your love for me, to understand what I sometimes suffer), you, who take an interest in me and treat me as a sister—is it to be wondered at that when I see you my face should wear a look which at other times is never seen upon it?'

'No,' she said, 'I cannot wonder at it. I, Mary, I am so utterly selfish, that sometimes I don't seem to understand things.'

She gazed at me so eagerly as she spoke, with what seemed to me such a sudden fear on her face, though of what I could not even conceive—a look so entirely opposite to the

calm tone of her voice—that I lost all the pity for myself which I had been conjuring up for the last few minutes in astonishment at her changed manner.

'What is the matter, Marion?'

'Nothing,' she said, turning her eyes away. 'I was thinking of what you said, that's all. Mary,' she went on, after a moment's pause, 'is there no remedy for this?'

'For what?'

'For this desolate, dreary life you are leading now?'

'What remedy can there be?'

'Would you,' she said, 'would you come and live with us when——' She stopped.

'With you and Mr. Harrop, you mean, when you are married?'

'Yes.'

'No. I would rather die.'

All the misery and agony of such an existence seemed already present with me. I felt hot and suffocated.

'I cannot understand you, Mary.'

'I suppose not,' I said bitterly. 'Why should you trouble about me?'

'Mr. Harrop was puzzled with you yesterday; and no wonder if—if you were then as you are now. Poor girl! I would do anything in my power to help you. What can I do?'

'You cannot help me, Marion. After all, things are no worse with me than they were a month ago, no worse than they have been for years. What I have borne so long I can continue to suffer. It is only that at some times I feel my troubles more acutely than at others. It is my fate to be lonely, and I must submit to it as patiently as I can.'

She made no answer to this, only fondling and caressing me, and trying in every silent way to soothe my distress. A sudden thought came to me.

'Marion, look at this.'

I put my hand in my pocket and brought out the magazine, or rather weekly paper she had lent me so long back. 'Look, Marion.

This has lain untouched in my drawer nearly ever since it has been in my possession. You have never directly asked me for it, and I have had no opportunity, till now, of returning it to you.'

'No opportunity? You have seen me often.'

'Yes, but I have something to say to you about it, and I mean I have had no opportunity of saying it.'

'I have wanted it very much,' she went on, not heeding my remark, 'but always forgot to tell you so. Give it to me, Mary,' she added, as I held it purposely back from her.

'I have something to say to you about it, Marion,' I repeated impatiently.

'Well, what is it? You've found Mr. Graeme's article?'

'I have found this,' I said, unfolding the paper, and pointing with my finger to the paragraph relating to the death of my brother. 'That is all I read. You will say it is enough, I think.'

She glanced through it quickly. 'Who is it?' she said. 'Is he—was he—related to you, Mary?'

'He was my brother, Marion. You know who my father was. Don't you see that this man's father was mine?'

'Your brother?' she exclaimed. 'I—I could not understand, Mary. I did not know—I never heard you had a brother.'

'It would have been better for me if I too had never known it,' I answered bitterly. 'He was no brother to me. He is dead now, and God may have forgiven him more fully than I have done. Don't speak of him any more, Marion.'

'If you would only let me help you,' she began. 'If you would only trust me——'

'I have nothing to trust to you,' I interrupted, 'and nothing to add to what I have said. I merely pointed out those words to you to prevent your first addressing me respecting them, and also to prevent the knowledge that

this man was my brother from spreading through the place.'

'But Mary, dear, do you know—are you sure that——'

'I know everything,' I broke in, only anxious to change the subject of conversation. 'Why do you persist in speaking about this thing, when you see that your doing so pains me?'

She made no answer, only caressing me again and stroking my hair. I drew back impatiently.

'Don't,' I said, fretfully. 'It only annoys me; I cannot bear it.'

She looked puzzled, but desisted instantly, and I sat some time without speaking, she as silent as myself.

'Marion,' I said presently, wishing to change the current of my thoughts, yet scarcely knowing what subject to introduce, 'do you ever hear anything of Mrs. Graeme?'

She seemed surprised at the question, I thought.

'No—I have heard nothing of her since her marriage, except on one or two occasions, when I have asked after her health. The answer was, "Quite well." That's all I know about her.'

'And all you care to know, I dare say?'

'I don't say that; but I don't like to ask questions, you see. I do not dislike Fanny. I always liked—no, not that—I always took an interest in Mr. Graeme; and now, naturally, his wife claims some of my spare thoughts. I——'

'I can't think how you *could* like him, Marion. *I* never did.'

'I contradicted the "like." Why I don't know—for, on second, or rather third thoughts, I think I may say that I really *do* like him.'

'*I* never did,' I repeated.

'So I know. You always took care to give everyone that impression; not only by

volunteering your opinion verbally whenever you had the chance, but also by your treatment of him. There was no love lost between you, as people say, for he seemed to have a strange mixture of feeling for you.'

'*Mixture* of feeling!'

'Yes. But bad predominating over good. I don't think he loved you, Mary,' she added, laughing. The word 'loved,' as applied under the circumstances, seemed to me so peculiar, if not actually absurd, that I could merely ejaculate it, after my friend, in a doubtful tone.

'No,' she repeated, laughing again; 'I don't think he loved you, Mary.'

'Perhaps not,' I answered, in a careless tone. 'I am, though, on the whole, rather more honoured than I was aware of, for I imagined his feeling towards me to be one of unmitigated dislike; not that he was simply wanting in love for me, or had a "mixture of feeling" for me, as you express it.'

'Well, it's as well not to cherish any bitterness for him now, for he goes away shortly—not, I believe, to return, for many years. It is quite on the cards, Mary, that you will never see his face again.'

'Where is he going, then?'

'To New Zealand. I told you that before, I think; also how he is to be occupied there.'

'Yes, I remember. But you also said, if I mistake not, that he was to return there in a year from the date of his first arrival in England. Surely he has exceeded his term of leave, has he not?'

'I suppose he has had it lengthened. Now I think of it, I fancy I did hear something to that effect. But I know nothing certain as to his arrangements, Mary; and I must acknowledge that, though I like him personally, they certainly fail to interest me much.'

'You *always* liked him though, Mary,' I said, laughing. 'I'm glad you own to that.'

'Of course,' she said; 'I do not deny it. Why should I do so?'

After a silence of some moments she suddenly rose, moved the low chair in which she had been reclining nearer to the fire, and, re-seating herself, relapsed again into thought. The evening was drawing in rapidly, but the fire made the room light. In those few quiet minutes I made up my mind. The question I had so often resolved to put once more to my friend, but which it had ever seemed to me I should never again have the courage to utter, broke from my lips almost before I knew I had begun to speak.

'Marion,' I said, 'do you—do you love Mr. Harrop?'

She looked up now. 'Why do you ask, Mary?'

She spoke so calmly that the impetuous rush of my thoughts was stilled instantly.

'Is it not natural to ask?'

'Is it not rather natural to conclude that there is no necessity to ask? Is it not

rather natural to deduce, from the fact that I have promised to be his wife, that I *do* love him?'

'On the contrary, it appears to me to be natural, from what I have seen of your conduct lately, to feel uncertain on the subject altogether. At all events, I do feel uncertain.'

'Why?'

'Because of your behaviour the last few weeks. It does not appear to me that you act as a woman usually acts who is about to be married to the man she loves. Your face does not wear the happy look it should wear. Your eyes are not brighter than of old, nor as bright—they seem to me to have a shadow in them.'

'How poetical we are!'

'I am in earnest, though. I have noticed a change in you since—since all this happened. Not a pleasant change. It is as though the thought of your future made your heart ache, instead of filling it with joy.'

She was looking carelessly at me, with a smile on her face.

'There must be some reason for it,' I went on, obstinately. 'Why, if you are happy, should you not look happy? Or why, if you do not love the man to whom you are engaged, should you marry him? Tell me, Marion. Do you love him, or not?'

'Well. What do you mean by "love"?'

'What do I mean?' I repeated. 'Why, what *can* I mean? You know well enough.'

'Not at all. By asking me if I love the man I am about to marry, do you mean am I perfectly pleased and willing to marry him; or do you ask if I feel for him the blind, meaningless infatuation felt by some unreasonable human beings for others, probably equally unreasonable? In which way am I to take the question?'

'Marion, why do you jest about it? You know thoroughly what I mean. Do you love him or not?'

'Well, then, Mary, if you are really in

"serious earnest," as the children call it, and bent upon a serious answer, you shall have it. In the way I fancy you interpret the word "love" I certainly do not love him.'

I did not realise it at first. I only thought vaguely that that which I had craved for with the whole strength and passion of my being—that, which being denied to me, my whole life seemed a blank, was lavished upon this girl, and she valued it as dross.

'You do not love him, Marion!' I said, calmly.

'No. But I doubt not that in time it will be different. He loves me, and that is enough.'

'Enough!' I said.

'Yes, enough to make me see that it is best to act as I am acting—best to decide as I have decided. He is happy, Mary, and I will act in all the future so that he shall never be otherwise.'

'But—does he know this?'

'Know what?'

'That you do not love him?'

'You silly child! When I said I did not "love" him I used the word in its true and entire signification. I meant that my whole soul, as it were—my whole mind was not given entirely to him. I did not mean that I had no affection for him, no esteem and regard, and all that sort of thing. I did not mean that I did not like and respect him very much. In truth I not only like him extremely, I not only respect and esteem him thoroughly, but there is in my heart a quiet—I don't know by what name to call it—I think I must come back to the old word—"affection." Yes, that's it,—"Affection." There is, in my heart, a quiet affection for him, which is very pleasant to feel now, and will, I firmly believe, increase year by year.'

'A quiet affection.' The words sounded to me as blank as the dead silence of nature before thunder. In my heart was the fierce passion of the storm.

'"Quiet affection!"' I repeated. 'I

should have thought such a feeling on your part for such a man as—as—the one of whom we are speaking—was foreign to your whole nature. I could not have believed either, Marion, that you could consent to marry anyone for whom you felt no more——'

'And why not?' she asked.

'Because a great, passionate love is possible to you, and the time must come when you will feel it.'

'Ah! A *grande passion*, as the French call it! Well, it's very pretty—in romance. But you are wrong, Mary. You should not say the time *must* come (she spoke more seriously now), but the time *may* come. This allows that it may *not* come—and, if this should be the case, I have decided for the best, for—for—this man's heart will not be wounded.'

'And if it *should* come, Marion?'

'Oh! nonsense!' she said, lightly.

'But surely it is possible?' I urged.

'"Possible!"' she repeated, scornfully.

'Of course it's *possible.* Everything is possible, if time is long enough. There is nothing so degrading as to torment oneself about possibilities.'

'Then you are contented to risk the possibility, I may say the probability, of your future life being rendered unhappy, and——'

'I am contented with my fate,' she interrupted, 'and shall ever be contented with it.'

'I cannot help thinking you are altogether wrong, Marion. I wish you thought differently.'

'We should find our opinions still at variance,' she replied, 'if we were to spend all the rest of the evening in discussing the subject. But I do not intend to discuss it at all. I prefer not. He loves me so, Mary,' she went on, after a pause, 'he loves me so dearly—why should I hurt him now, only because we cannot say—the future *must* be happy?'

'It would have been better had you never

seen him,' I said; 'better if you had stayed abroad, and never returned to England.'

'Better for him, do you mean?'

'I mean for both of you.'

'That may be, according to your logic,' she answered, lightly. 'But, as you see, I *did* return to England, and I *did* meet him; and, having gone too far in this matter to retract, without causing, for certain, almost as great misery to him as any future could possibly bring, it is best to leave things as they are. They must take their course.'

'You may have thought seriously on the subject at one time, Marion; but you are not speaking seriously about it now. You are smiling, as though the most important things were of no importance.'

'You silly child! I am amused at your unusual gravity. But, if you make such a point of my being serious also, I will repeat, with becoming decorum, my reasons for my present course of conduct. It is mere repetition, you know, but you shall have it.

Now, listen. This man loves me. I, on my part, feel a steady, quiet affection for him, grounded on his noble qualities and open, guileless nature. His future happiness depends upon his union with me. Should I leave him his life would be made desolate. Now, being thoroughly aware of this state of things, am I to marry him or not? Am I——'

'You ought not to marry him,' I interrupted; 'you are doing a great wrong.'

'I think differently. If I forsook him his life would be to all intents and purposes ruined. Besides,' she added, with a fresh assumption of the light manner she had displayed so recently, 'do you really think the man is born who would have the power to inspire me with that impulsive, reasonless love, without which you appear to think a person is not justified in marrying?'

'Had I known earlier what you have told me this evening, Marion, I should never have ceased urging you to take the course oppo-

site to that which you have decided upon taking.'

'That's not answering my question.'

'Marion, can I not influence you in any way?'

'In none at all,' she replied, laughing. 'You can no more turn me from my path than you can stop the wind blowing. You are young,' she said, 'and talk great nonsense. You will forgive my saying so, I know.'

She rested her head upon her hand, and gazed steadily upon the glowing fire, her lustrous eyes never shrinking from the bright light, and her passionate full lips pressed together. I sat watching her till I could bear it all no longer. The bitter pain and agony I had so long been suffering broke into words almost before I knew I was about to speak.'

'And it is for this,' I burst out, 'that my last miserable hope has been taken from me! For the sake of a woman who cares no more

for him than the dust of the earth he has——'

She started and turned towards me, with a look on her face which I can never forget. In its great pity and wonder it took away from me, for a moment, even in my mad excitement, the power of speech. Then I went on heedlessly:

'It is for this,' I said, 'that he has forgotten me! It is for this that he has crushed, mercilessly and without pity, the life that lay at his feet.'

I think, in spite of that look upon her face, she was not thoroughly realising what that look told me she understood. 'What do you mean?' she said, slowly. 'Whose life has he crushed—and for what?'

'"For what?"' I repeated. '"For what?" For this—this—this "quiet affection" of yours, this "respect," this "esteem," this—this——'

'Mary! Do you know what you are saying?'

'For your miserable, paltry sufferance of him,' I went on, 'he has found it in his heart to turn from, and, for aught I know, to despise me. He loved me once,' I said, passionately, knowing in my heart how thoroughly I lied in saying it; 'he loved me once, but he loves me no more. Your beauty has blinded him, like the sun, and he glories in his blindness. He thinks he is right; but he is deceived!—miserably and awfully mistaken and deceived! God shall judge my words; and may He pity him, when to him they shall be proved!'

I scarcely knew what I said—only dimly what I meant. One thing I knew, and that was that I was not only lying, but talking as it was a shame and a degradation to any woman to talk.

'Why should I have to suffer, and you have nothing but happiness?' I went on. 'Why is it that the one thing I valued above all others is taken from me to be lavished on you, to whom it is but as a passing pleasure

and amusement? Why should it be so, Marion? Alas! what have I done that you should break my heart?'

She made no answer—only still looked at me with that same great look of pity and wonder.

'Do you know,' I went on, 'that I cared nothing for it till this moment? Do you know that what it seemed to me before is less than nothing to what it is now? Do you know that all the pain I felt in the past was as pleasure to the pain your words have given me? Why have you done it?' I said. 'Why have you done it?'

'Done what, Mary? I—I hardly understand.'

'Why have you taken his love from me—stolen it—when you had nothing to give him in return?'

'I—I hardly understand,' she repeated.

'"Hardly understand!"' I exclaimed bitterly. 'You know well what I mean. Why should you deny it? It can serve no end.'

She did not move nor speak.

'When I think of it all,' I went on, 'it overpowers me with amazement. I forget for the time my own pain in the thought of your utter heartlessness and hardness. Have you no explanation to give, no justification to offer?'

Again she made no reply, only still looked at me with that unchanged look of pity and wonder.

'Why do you not speak?' I said. 'Why do you sit there silent, unless it is that you are self-condemned? Are my words lies?'

She opened her lips—I raised my hand and warded her off.

'I will not hear,' I said. 'I will hear nothing. Your words would kill me. They would fall upon me like fire.'

I turned from her, seized my hat and cloak, and hurried from the house.

I knew not which road I took. I ran on blindly without power to think clearly, till I stumbled over a huge stone, causing myself

to fall heavily. As I rose I saw that my arm was bruised and bleeding, and, with a strange feeling of pity, as though it belonged to some one else, I looked at it tenderly, and bound it round with my handkerchief. Then I sat down on the roadside by the stone which had wounded me, and thought, I know not why, of that night in the schoolroom years before when she had tended me in my illness, and looked into the fire with unshrinking eyes, as she had looked to-night.

CHAPTER XXXV.

About three weeks passed away, and I learned one morning from the children that 'Uncle Charles and Marion were going to be married at last.'

'It's not to be very grand, you know, Miss Browne; not like Fanny's wedding was. There are to be very few people indeed. And—isn't it funny?—she's to be married from here, and the breakfast is to be here, you know, and—and all that sort of thing.'

I made no remark.

'Aren't you surprised, Miss Browne?'

'At what, Aura?'

'Why, that Marion's going to be married from here? It's such a curious thing, you know. Girls ought to be married from their own homes, and their papas should give

them away. But Mr. Launceston's going off to travel to-morrow, and won't be here at all. Isn't it strange? Why don't you answer, Miss Browne?'

'Answer what?'

'Isn't it stra—a—ange?' she repeated, raising her voice as she spoke.

'Yes, I suppose so,' I said, wearily.

'Mamma thinks it is. But it's nothing more than she expected, she says, because Mr. Launceston's half-mad, and Marion takes after him.'

'For shame, Aura! You must not say such things.'

'*I* don't say them; it's mamma. She said so to Uncle Charles; and he said——'

I looked at her now. She stopped for a moment, and then went on, well pleased at having at length roused me to some appearance of interest.

'And he said, "Madam! If you utter such another sentence in my presence, or if I should hear you have uttered such another

out of my presence, you shall have cause to repent your words till the day of your death!" I can remember every syllable distinctly, Miss Browne, because he looked so terrible when he said it. His eyes flashed like—like the steel in the drawing-room grate. I never saw anyone look so strange; and mamma seemed frightened, and took up her smelling-bottle, though she laughed. That was only yesterday. *I* was frightened. I sat looking at him, and couldn't turn my eyes away. Nellie was afraid too—at least you would have been, Nellie, wouldn't you, if you'd heard it? But she was not there, Miss Browne.'

'Yes,' said Nellie, doubtfully, 'perhaps I should have been, Aura.'

'And then, Miss Browne, Uncle Charles went out of the room. I followed him and spoke to him, but he never answered. He took his hat and went out of doors without noticing me. I haven't seen him since. He never came to say "Good night" to us children as usual. He forgot, I suppose. But

he never forgot before. But isn't it strange about Miss Launceston? I think mamma's right; don't you?'

'It is no business of yours, Aura, and no business of mine. Mr. Launceston may have the best of reasons for acting as he intends to act. He is not likely to favour you and me with them, you know, so we had doubtless better mind our own affairs. Perhaps he does not like to part with his daughter,' I added, 'and so does not care to see her married.'

'Yes. I think I heard something about it's being that. But still mamma says it's odd, and I'm old enough to judge now whether she is right or not. And another strange thing, Miss Browne. Do you know that though Marion's papa is so rich she will insist upon having the very quietest wedding. And she looks *so* wretched—mamma says one would think she was going to be buried, not married. There's nobody coming, Miss Browne, and there won't be any fun at all. I'm pretty certain that——'

'Don't tell stories, Aura,' interrupted her sister. 'There are a lot of people coming. There's Mrs. Gray, and Mrs.——'

'Be quiet, you silly child. I mean only two or three will be here—two or three nobodies—old fogey friends of mamma's. She would have *them*, she said, though uncle didn't want them. I'd as soon not have anyone at all. It's another of Miss Launceston's absurdities, mamma says, to want to be married as if it were a secret—but mamma will have some of her own way, because it's her house, you know, and she can do what she likes in it.'

'That's enough about it, Aura.'

'Do wait a minute,' she pleaded, 'just a little more. I want to ask you something, you know. Don't you like Miss Launceston?'

'Yes, Aura,' I said; 'I like her very much.'

'So do I, and so does Nellie, and so does everybody, and it will be capital when she's

our aunt. Mamma's the only one who can't bear her; but though of course she is right in what she says about her—for mamma's so clever, you know—yet *I* like her very, very much. It'll be so delicious to call her "Aunt Marion." '"Aunt Marion!"' she repeated, in an enraptured tone. '"Aunt Marion!" Doesn't it sound luscious?'

'Yes, indeed,' I answered, laughing in spite of myself, 'it does sound pretty.'

'And *you* like her?'

'Certainly I do. I told you so before.'

'But you don't care for her as much as you used to do, do you?'

'What makes you think so?'

'Because you don't go to see her now; and you wouldn't go down into the drawing-room the other evening when uncle wanted you to.'

'I had a headache, Aura.'

'Yes. I know that. I heard you say so. But it wasn't your headache that kept you upstairs. I'm too sharp; *I* know.' And Miss

Aura nodded her own pretty, fair head, with a very cunning look indeed.

'What was it, then?'

'Why, at one time all the headaches in the world wouldn't have kept you up here, if you'd had a chance of going down when she was in the house. Now, if a little tiny one—a little tiny-tiny one (and I don't believe it was more, for you're quite well this morning), is excuse enough to keep you from her, there must be some reason for it, and that reason, I fancy, is that you don't care for her as much as you did. She thinks you don't care for her too.'

'She thinks so!' I exclaimed involuntarily. 'How do you know that?'

'Why, by listening—keeping my ears open, you know. Some people go about with them shut, but I'm not one of those. Mamma had sent for me, Miss Browne, to stay down a little, you know. You remember my going, I dare say, and while I was in the drawing-room Uncle Charles told one of the servants

to ask you to come down and play some music, and mamma said there were quite enough without you; and uncle said——'

'Never mind that, Aura. Tell me what Miss Launceston said.'

'I'm coming to that in a moment. I don't think Marion wanted you any more than mamma did, for she said, "Oh, don't ask her to come down, Charles," or something of the kind. "I'm sure she would rather not do so." She seemed in earnest too, and spoke very quickly. But uncle took no notice, only repeated his message to the servant. When she came back—no one spoke while she was gone—there were only us four, you know——'

'Yes, I know, Aura. Go on.'

'Well, when she came back and said you had a headache, and begged to be excused, Miss Launceston looked so sad I can't tell you—sadder even than she generally does; and she has always looked wretched lately. Uncle Charles coughed—a sham cough, you

know, like he puts on when he's vexed; and mamma said, when Anne had left the room "it was a good thing you had had the sense to stay where you were, for your room was preferable to your company, as you had had a sulky fit on for the last fortnight—nobody knew what about—which gave you the appearance of a stuffed toad." '

It had been impossible for me to stop my little friend, for she took no heed of my ordering her to be quiet, but raised her voice as I raised mine, till she brought out the 'toad' in a perfect shriek.

'Aura, have I not told you many times that you must not repeat to people what is said of them by others when they are not present?'

'You must take the bad with the good, you know,' said Miss Aura, philosophically. 'Some people call us angels, and other people say we're toads. It's the way of the world, I suppose.'

'Does Miss Launceston really look so ill?' I asked, after a pause.

'Awful. Everyone notices it. Mamma's always saying she is more fit to be buried than married, and Uncle Charles frets about her, I think, sometimes. For when she's not noticing him he watches her with the gravest look on his face you ever saw. Then she catches him all of a sudden, and, instead of asking him what's the matter, she says something funny and makes him laugh. I've seen it lots of times.'

'But, Aura, you have told me how Miss Launceston looked, but you've not told me what she *said* about my not coming down.'

'I didn't say she said anything.'

'But did she?' I knew Miss Aura's little ways.

'"One should not repeat to people what is said of them by others when they are not present." Ahem!'

I was ashamed now to press for an answer.

'However,' my little friend went on, true to the natural tendency of her sex to take pleasure in imparting information, 'this is, no doubt, an exceptional case, so here goes. Well, if you must know, Miss Launceston *did* say something, and this is what she said. She turned to Uncle Charles—she was seated at the piano, and he was standing by her—and she said, in a sad tone—the saddest tone possible, 'Don't let it worry you, Charles. She does not mean it for unkindness to me. She is not well, poor girl.'

'And——'

'And uncle put his head down and whispered something to her. I heard what he said. He said——'

'Never mind, Aura.'

'All right; then I'll keep it to myself. It was something about "tenderness," and "goodness," and pretty soft things of that kind; but, as you wish it, I will keep the full account to myself.'

'I do wish it, Aura.'

'Very good, then, I've done. And, in obedience to the implied commands of my governess, I resume my studies.' Which she accordingly did without delay.

'Has he guessed my secret?' I asked myself. 'Can he know of it? No, it is impossible.'

Then I thought of the beauty of her face and its quiet sadness, but it had no power to touch my heart. I could not forgive her. Alas! I had nothing to forgive! I knew too well that she had done me no wrong; that the wrong really lay in my own erring, rebellious heart. Had she really injured me perchance forgiveness had been easy.

Since the evening I had in my passionate despair so abruptly left her presence I had not seen her once. She had written to me several times, some few gentle words, asking me to go to her, but I had neither replied to her letters nor obeyed their contents. Bitterness and anger were in my heart, though, through all my unhappiness, I

felt how unjust and reasonless it was to encourage myself in feeling either the one or the other. But I was mad, and would not hear the voice of Reason. 'I hate her,' I said to myself. 'She has stolen his love from me as a thief steals in the night. If it were to her what it would have been to me, I could have been patient, but it is to her nothing—less than nothing! So with a fierce passion, which, in its wicked intensity, was unlike any feeling I had ever before experienced, I struggled with all gentler thoughts which were fighting for victory over the determination of my spirit. It seemed as if some evil demon possessed me and filled me with a heart which was not my own. At one moment a dreadful temptation assailed me to end with my own hands the life which seemed a burden to me. This lasted but an instant, and then vanished; never, I trust, to return. 'No,' I said, 'I will be contented to live and hate her with a bitter hatred;' the intensity of which, I even fancied, might have

some vague power to hurt her. 'She shall know of it,' I said, 'and the knowledge shall have power to darken the brightness of her life. When she wakes at night—with him sleeping by her side—oh! thought of agony and despair!—she shall think of it and weep!'

And so I communed with my heart—nursing and cherishing its angry passions, till all reasoning power seemed gone. Oh, my poor friend! Who shall tell any future which God has not revealed?

CHAPTER XXXVI.

The day before that appointed for the wedding arrived. A bright, beautiful morning. My little pupils had a holiday, and, leaving me to my own devices, had volunteered assisting in the general preparations. I sat alone in the schoolroom, with my face buried in my hands, motionless.

I had risen early ; and making illness my excuse to the children for not offering to join them in their quest of pleasant occupation, had taken a book and endeavoured to pass the time with its contents. For the first hour or two I had succeeded tolerably well, though interrupted occasionally by messages from below, entreating me to forget my headache and agree to make myself useful. At length, however, I began to feel wearied with the constant

effort to drive away the thoughts which, in spite of all effort, would, at some moments, seem to print themselves on the page before me, and I threw down my book in despair. Then I sat still, with my face in my hands, giving way once more to my wicked hatred and anger. When my passion was at its height I heard a footstep on the stairs, and in a moment Aura was in the room. I raised my head and met her eyes, smiling.

'Miss Browne, do come down. We want you so much. Miss Launceston's here, you know. Uncle's making everybody laugh. He says if you won't come down for my fetching he shall have to come after you himself.'

'But I'm not well enough to come, Aura.'

'Oh!' she exclaimed, looking full at me, 'how ill you do look! I never noticed it before, because everyone's so jolly, and I was thinking of it all. Shall I get you something? Some wine and cakes?'

'No, thank you, Aura. Nothing would

make me better just at present. Don't say I'm very ill, only that my head still aches very much, and I'm going to lie down—that's all.'

'Perhaps, if you'd come downstairs you'd feel better.'

'No, thank you. I would rather be here. The noise would make me worse, and I might not be able to be with you all in the morning.'

'Oh! that would be dreadful!'

'Very well, then, to prevent it, you had better make your friends feel quite sure that I am not well enough to join you now.'

'All right; but I'm so sorry.' She stooped to kiss me, and then ran off.

I sat a moment, wondering whether I had acted wisely or not; wondering whether my conduct would lead to the slightest suspicion in the household as to its real cause. Then, laughing at my own absurdity, I rose wearily to go into my bedroom and rest for a little while. As I did so I heard a few quick

steps, and Aura appeared a second time, followed an instant after by Mr. Harrop.

'Good morning, Miss Browne. I have come for you myself, and will take no denial.' Then, looking at me earnestly, 'Why, you are really very ill! What is it? What has made you so?'

'I am not so very bad, thank you,' I answered, in as careless a tone as I could assume. 'I am subject to severe headaches, as I fear all the house must know, from the trouble I so often give with them, and nothing but rest will do me good.'

'I am so grieved,' he said, 'so sorry that when a happy time has come for all of us you should be disabled from making one of our party. The children are at the height of enjoyment, and would give me no peace till I came up for you. Can I do anything to help you?'

'No, nothing, thank you. I am going to try and get a little sleep, and then, you know, I shall forget—I shall forget my pain.'

At this juncture some one called, 'Miss Aura, Miss Aura,' and that young lady ran off swiftly.

'Shall I ask Miss Launceston to come to you?'

'No, oh, no!' I exclaimed, hurriedly.

He looked so surprised, and puzzled, and pained, that I wished my words unsaid as soon as they were uttered.

'I cannot understand you,' he said; 'there used to be such affection between you and her. What has stepped in to mar it and make you both so—I don't know what to call it? Unless I am to put it down,' he added, more lightly, 'to the natural fickleness of woman, in which, however, I am not a sincere believer, I cannot account in any way for the apparent change in your sentiments towards —towards your former friend.'

I made no answer.

'If she has hurt you in any way,' he went on, 'I am certain it must have been unintentionally. Let her come up here and

speak for herself. She would wish nothing better.'

'I cannot see her,' I said. 'I cannot talk. I am only fit to sleep and forget my pain.'

'Very good, if it must be so. But, leaving Miss Launceston out of the question, it damps our ardour and enjoyment of the proceedings downstairs to feel that one is missing who should be present.'

'No one will miss *me*,' I said. 'I am not accustomed to being missed.'

'But you may be missed without knowing it is so. You seem just now to be taking a very dark view of things,' he added, smiling.

'There has been very little brightness in my life,' I answered, scarcely knowing what to say. 'And—and—I always did look at the dark side of things—at least, I've contracted a habit of doing so lately. It grows lighter from being constantly looked at.'

'I'm glad you find it so.'

As he spoke I saw the kind interest in his face give way to the expression of

anxious care which I had so often seen on his countenance since the morning of his niece's wedding.

'We all have our troubles,' he went on, after a pause, 'and we are all apt to think our own particular grievances worse to endure than those of our neighbours. There are many lives which to outward observers seem full of happiness, but in which one dark spot has power to dim all else. "The heart knoweth its own bitterness."'

'Truly,' I said to myself, 'mine knows its own,' but I made no audible reply.

'Cannot I really do anything for you?' he added, in a more cheerful tone. 'Perhaps there is something that distresses you which I might possibly remedy, if you would only trust me. You have not, I hope, forgotten the promise you made me some time back—of which, by the way, it seems to me I am always reminding you.'

'Oh, no,' I said, hastily; 'I—I have not forgotten it.'

'You must look upon me as a friend. Anything that should be in my power it will always be a pleasure to me to do to assist and help you in any way. And—and —Marion also,' he added, hesitatingly. 'In spite of the little cloud that has arisen between you, I know it is one of the great desires of her life to prove to you how sincerely and truly she loves you.'

'She has often told me so,' I answered, 'and she has ever shown by her conduct the truth of her words.' I spoke with all the bitterness I felt, but in his simplicity he saw no mockery in my speech.

'I am glad to hear you say so,' he exclaimed, his face seeming to me actually to beam. 'I assure you it is one of my chief wishes that she should be your dearest friend. It is——'

I could bear it no longer. 'I am not well enough to talk,' I interrupted, wearily. 'I want to rest.'

'It is very cruel of me to keep you, then.

I will go at once. I am afraid you are not even so well as you allow you are. Do let me send Miss Launceston to you.'

'Why should she come?' I asked. 'She can do me no good.'

'As you please,' he answered; 'I thought you were angry with her, she might be able to explain away any misunderstanding. If you were to see her,' he added almost pleadingly, 'I am sure you would at once forgive her all her offences.'

'I can see no one now. I am too ill.'

'Then good-bye.'

'Good-bye,' I answered wearily, and without another word he left me to myself. Then I went into my room, and, throwing myself on the bed, began to nurse my misery, giving way to my unhappiness thoroughly, with no thought of endeavouring to rouse myself to a more sane course of conduct.

I lay there for hours. The children came from time to time, bringing me fruit

and various dainties to tempt my appetite in place of the dinner I refused to taste, and still persisting in endeavouring to induce me to accompany them downstairs. At length they came to bid me good-night, but fancying me asleep, for I feigned to be so, they kissed me gently, and left the room as noiselessly as possible. The usual romping and fun in their bedroom prolonged after the excitement of the day, and in the anticipation of the morrow, to an unusually late hour, had long ago ceased, and still I lay sleepless. It seemed to me, in my despair, that I should never sleep again.

'Why cannot I die?' I said. 'Why does not God send death to me when I am longing and praying for it? Others die—those for whom this world is full of happiness, and who would give even their happiness to live on in it. *They* die. While to me, who long for death, death is denied.'

I unclosed my eyes. The room was almost dark—only one faint streak of light

stealing into it. As I glanced round I became conscious of the sound of footsteps. Some one came into the room closing the door on entering. I shut my eyes to feign sleep. But the light came nearer and nearer to them. Curiosity prevailed, and I opened them to meet those of Marion Launceston fixed upon me.

She was looking down at me with such a quiet, still expression on her face that I felt, in the raging passion of the moment, that if any word of mine could strike her dead, I would utter it instantly.

'Why are you here?' I said, not stirring hand or foot.

She made no answer. I rose now and sat on the bed.

'Why are you here?' I repeated.

She moved across the room, placed the light on the dressing-table, and came back to me. I followed her every movement, still hating her blindly, and longing for the power to kill her with a word. She drew nearer

to me and took my hand. I forced her away.

'If you have come to speak to me,' I said, 'speak, and speak quickly. The sooner you have said what you have to say, the sooner I shall be rid of your presence. What do you wish?'

'Mary,' she said, 'I am come to ask you to forgive me.' Over all the beauty of her face there came a sweet expression of calm that I had never seen before upon it. A memory came back to me of an evening years ago, when my father had drawn my childish attention to the stillness of the sea, which lay before us. 'It is still,' he said; 'there is no trouble on it.' So her face looked then. It was as though an angel had kissed it. I recollected vaguely, afterwards, the peaceful look it wore; but when the first momentary consciousness of it had passed away from me, I saw it no longer. I saw nothing but her splendid beauty, nothing but her lustrous eyes, which, I falsely told myself,

had used their light to blast my life. 'Forgive you?' I said. 'Forgive you? Have you come here to mock me?'

'No, Mary. Oh, no!'

'Then what do you mean?'

'I came to ask you to forgive me,' she repeated. 'Whatever I have done has been done in utter ignorance, unwittingly and unknowingly.'

'Hear her,' I said, passionately, glancing round the room as I spoke. 'Hear this woman, who has ruined my life—who has made it desolate as a parched and barren desert. Hear her words now!'

I had not the slightest idea whom or what I was addressing. It only seemed to me as if something or someone could hear me and pity me. Then I turned to her again.

'These are grand words,' I said. 'Grand words—like words in books or plays. I dare say you laugh at them. I dare say you mock——'

'Oh! Mary, do not talk like this.'

'I don't want to talk,' I said. 'I want you to leave me. Why do you come here, with your beauty and your falseness, to make me hate and despise you even more than I have done? Go,' I said, passionately; 'I will not have you here.'

'Listen to me, Mary, for one moment. Do you not believe that whatever I have done has been done in utter ignorance of your feelings and your hopes?'

'I believe no word that you say.'

'You *must* hear me,' she said. 'I repeat that all that I have done I have done in ignorance of the pain which my actions would cause you. I have——'

'Ignorance!' I interrupted. 'Ignorance! Is that your plea? It is false. You are all false. Ignorance? No, no! God has made you as clever and far-seeing as you are beautiful and deceitful. Ignorance?' I laughed. 'She talks to me of ignorance. She talks to me of her ignorance!'

'Mary, the time will surely come when

this bitterness will have passed away, and you will regret deeply and vainly your wicked anger against me. The time *must* come——'

'Never,' I broke in. 'Never, never will such a time come for me. But a time will come for you, and may it be soon, I pray God, when you will realise the wrong you have done me. I have prayed that He will punish you with a never-ceasing remembrance of the misery you have brought upon me. I have prayed that your pillow may be wet with your tears of sorrow and remorse. I have prayed to God not to forgive you till I forgive you, and that will be never—never!'

'Oh, Mary!' she said. 'You don't understand. These passionate feelings never last long. You will soon think differently, and care perhaps absolutely nothing for that which now seems everything to you. Besides,' she added, proudly, 'you are angry with me without a cause. I have never wilfully hurt you. It is a poor nature that

cannot forgive an unintentional wrong. But I am unkind,' she went on in a gentler tone. 'I forget the pain you suffer.' She put her arm round me, and her face close to mine. 'Kiss me, Mary dear. Let me know that you do not hate me.'

I pushed her back roughly. 'You are a hypocrite,' I said. 'Keep away from me.'

Her face flushed, and an angry light shone in her eyes for a moment. Then she turned quietly away, walked to the dressing-table and took the candle in her hand. Then, without a word or sign, my dear friend, my true friend, my friend with the tender heart, left me alone in my darkness, and went out into the light.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE morning dawned fair and beautiful. The birds sang as though the world were newly made for them to sing its praises. The sun mounted high in the heavens, burning my eyes with its heat and brightness. I would not open them to welcome it. I lay immovable, vaguely wishing that there was no necessity for me to rise, and talk and act as in bygone days; yet knowing that the old life was no dream of the past, but still a reality of the present, and that I must leave my bed, and play my part in the day's drama as I had hitherto done.

I had just made up my mind to rouse myself without further delay, and make some sort of toilette befitting the occasion, when I was startled by the door of my room sud-

denly opening. Unclosing my eyes I saw that the intruder was Aura. I thought at the moment that she had come to display her finery, for she was in full attire ; but she merely looked round the room hurriedly, glanced at me without speaking, closed the door, and ran off.

I opened my watch. It was past nine o'clock, still early for my little pupil to be dressed for the day. Then I recollected that she had declared her intention of coaxing her nurse to get her and Nellie 'done,' as she called it, as soon as possible, in order, I conjectured, that they might sit about for a time and cater for general admiration, vanity being Miss Aura's besetting sin. Still I could not account either for her hurried manner, or her brusque treatment of myself. Her entrance, however, had served to distract the current of my thoughts, rousing me thoroughly to the necessity of struggling against my pain for a time. What if she should have noticed me closely, and should

say downstairs that she thought I had not been in bed all night! Perhaps the reason for her running off without speaking was that my general appearance startled her. Half alarmed, I set to work in earnest, and soon pronounced myself sufficiently adorned for the occasion. I rehearsed my part in the proceedings of the morning. 'I am to be ready in the drawing-room,' I said, 'at the time of the return from church, in order to be at hand to help Mrs. Chanter receive the guests.' This, in accordance with instructions received a few days previously.

I was sitting in state, as it were, waiting for anything that might occur, wishing from my heart that the day and its trouble were over—with no thought nor presentiment as to what that trouble was really to be—when I was startled by a quick, imperative knock at the door.

Strange as it may seem, the moment I heard this knock all my care and pain, all the selfish egotism I had so long been

cherishing, passed away instantly—they were gone as completely as though they had never had an existence. It seemed to me as if something terrible was taking place, in which I had no part nor lot, and which dwarfed my puny troubles into nothingness. In an instant, as the sound ceased, I was on my feet, with that curious feeling in my heart which many of us have experienced at some time of our lives—the feeling which almost amounts to a conviction that we have been in precisely the same situation, and in the midst of precisely the same circumstances, as the present, on some previous occasion; and that that which is about to happen is familiar to us, is also the natural and proper sequence of the existing state of things, could not be otherwise, and could not surprise us in the least, however remarkable in itself; though if questioned as to its nature and details, we should prove ourselves as utterly ignorant of them as of any other chain of events hidden in the impenetrable future. In an instant I

was on my feet, and before I could reply to the summons the door opened, and Mr. Harrop entered the room. There was such a singular expression on his face that for the moment I could hardly recognise him. He glanced slowly round the room, and then full at me. I knew the look then. It was the same that I had seen on my mother's face when she had received her son's letter to say he had deserted us. It was, if I may so express it, a stunned look, yet one that plainly said the awaking would be terrible. He continued watching me steadily for nearly a minute. At last he spoke, still watching me.

'She knows nothing,' he said, slowly, as though speaking to himself. 'What *can* she know? No; I am wrong.'

Then turning away, with his hand to his head, as though dazed and confused, he walked through the schoolroom, out of sight.

Before I could thoroughly realise that he was indeed gone, Aura appeared a second

time. She came running in wildly, crying and screaming.

'Where is Uncle Charles?' she said. 'Oh, poor Uncle Charles! Oh, Miss Browne, come down—Mamma thinks he will kill himself.'

'What is it?' I interrupted, coming back to life as it were, my heart beating with an awful fear. 'What has happened, Aura?' catching her dress as she turned to fly. 'Tell me what it is.'

'Come down,' she said, 'and you will see. I *can't* tell you,' and she slipped from my grasp. 'Oh, my poor uncle.'

I followed her swiftly downstairs. As I did so I heard a strange commotion—quick, eager voices, with pain in them, the sound of cries and tears, and the tread of many feet, hurrying to and fro. I went on, wildly. Passing through a group of servants—one old man wringing his hands and crying out something about 'Master Charles,' others talking hurriedly, or weeping, or half laughing—I

went into the dining-room. The children were standing near the door clinging together, as though frightened. Mrs. Chanter was in the middle of the room, no longer seated, but for once standing erect and immovable. The room was gaily decorated with flowers and garlands, and on the wall facing the door was a device in flowers, with the words 'Welcome Marion' in the centre. I thought of the childish hands which I knew had formed it, and, without knowing why it should be so, my very heart seemed to faint within me. I turned from it to look again at Mrs. Chanter. She was very pale, but there was a fierce, vindictive look on her face, which at the moment almost frightened me. Catching sight of me she seemed about to speak, but no sound came from her trembling lips. I think that her intense passion must for the time have deprived her of the power of utterance. I was watching her in fear and wonder, almost praying that she might speak to me, when Mr. Harrop, making his way

through the group of servants, who moved aside with awe-stricken faces, entered the room. His face had lost its stunned, bewildered expression, and, except for a white look about the mouth, and a strange glitter in the eyes, he was again my friend of old. His sister turned from me to him, and found her speech at last.

'Charles,' she exclaimed, the words seeming to me to rush from her lips like a torrent, 'I knew it. I knew it. I told you so, long ago. If you had listened to me things would never have been like this.'

Unless I had known her by her face and form, I should never have recognised her by her voice and manner. Every usual characteristic of her style of speech had disappeared.

'I knew it would come to this,' she went on, after a pause. 'There is no one to blame but yourself. You wilfully persisted in acting like a madman, and now you are rewarded. I am positive——'

The calmness of his face never changed for a moment, but the glitter in his eyes gave place to a stern, cold expression which awed me. They were like his brother's eyes when he had watched me talking to Miss Grimshaw years and years ago. I remember vaguely noticing this at the moment. Something in them must have frightened his sister, for she stopped suddenly as he looked at her, and turned away her head. He still kept them on her steadily for some time after she had ceased speaking, then, without answering her remarks, glanced quickly at the contents of the table, and the flowers, and decorations of the room. As he did so she recovered herself, and began a third time.

'Charles,' she said. 'I *will* speak, and you *shall* hear me. When that vile girl——,

He turned upon her with a fierce contempt that made her involuntarily shrink back.

'Silence!' he thundered. 'Silence! We want no talking here, madam. We want

no talking at all, especially of the kind in which you appear anxious to indulge. Miss Browne,' he added, suddenly addressing me, and speaking in his ordinary tone; 'will you kindly send those servants in here?'

I obeyed. They came trooping in, eager, after the manner of their kind, for any fresh phase of excitement.

'Have the goodness,' he said to them, 'to—to clear this table, and—and take away that mummery,' pointing to the flowers and wreaths. 'Clear them off at once.'

They set to work instantly. In two minutes' time not a sign of feasting or rejoicing was to be seen.

'Now, listen, all of you. Go on from this moment as though you had risen this morning with no thought of, nor preparation for, any unusual event. And should I hear that—that—the name of the lady who was this day to have honoured me with her hand has been mentioned by any one among you, either for good or evil—whoever shall

have spoken it leaves the service of this house. Now go.'

They obeyed in silence.

'Now, Miss Browne, excuse me. I think it is the usual time for commencing the children's morning studies. Aura and Nellie, go upstairs with Miss Browne to your lessons.'

Aura's obedience was to rush up to the speaker, throw her arms round his neck and smother him with tears and kisses. 'Oh, Uncle Charles! Where is Aunt Marion. Where is she gone? Oh, where is she gone?'

He started violently, but, pushing her gently away from him, held her by the arm and looked at her calmly.

'Did you hear what I just now said to the servants?'

'Yes, Uncle Charles.'

'I say it again to you, now. To you and my little pet Nellie,' putting his disengaged hand on that little girl's head, and stroking

her hair. 'Do you understand? You must forget that lady, and—and—her name.'

'Yes, Uncle.'

'Then kiss me, both of you, and go to the study with your governess, like the good children you have always been.'

They obeyed without another word, I following in silence.

As I passed through the room I heard him address his sister—

'Margaret,' he said, 'this, as you know, is not your usual morning-room. You will oblige me greatly if you will leave it, and pass this day as—as you usually pass your days. We must forget——'

These were the last words which, weeks afterwards, I recollected hearing. Before my foot touched the threshold of the door I fell heavily to the ground, stricken by the hand of God.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

I was ill for many weeks. I pass over the time which to me was a blank. There was no memory of the past on my mind the day I first woke to consciousness. On that, and many following, I was sensible only to what was going on around me. But at length I began, by degrees, to recollect the events which had led to my present position. Then I learned to wonder that I saw no face known to me except Mr. Harrop's. Each day he stood by my bed, or sat down by my side for a few moments, talking quietly to my nurse or myself. But for a long while I was too listless to ask questions ; and, when I did so, finding as a rule the old lady who tended me either pretended not to hear me, or made some excuse for not satisfying my

curiosity, I soon discontinued them, and took things as they came, quietly. Many days went by, and I became stronger as each one passed, and my interest in life and things around me began to grow with my strength.

At last the time came when I rose from my bed of sickness. I was dressed, and sat by the open window, with the sweet summer air stealing in. I felt calm and peaceful, rejoicing in the possession of the life which had so nearly passed away from me. The world seemed fresh and new to my eyes, and I revelled in its beauty, thanking God for His tender mercies to me, and praying for their continuance.

On that day, the first I had left my bed, Mr. Harrop was late in paying me his daily visit. All the morning I had looked forward to seeing him, even more than I had hitherto done, knowing he would be pleased to witness the improvement I had made in being able to enjoy the fresh air so thoroughly. As the half-hours passed, I

longed to ask the old nurse if she knew what had detained him, but timidity or shame kept my lips dumb.

'Nurse,' I said, presently, 'you have not plaited my hair. Doesn't it look untidy?'

She had washed and dressed me, and assisted me to my armchair by the window, but I had no remembrance of any more elaborate portion of my toilette.

'I brushed it, miss, as I always do. Don't you remember? As to plaiting, it will be a long time before it will want that, my poor little lady.'

I put my hand to my head. My long hair was all gone. In its place I felt something thick and short, just turning over my finger.

'Let me look at myself,' I said.

She hesitated for a few seconds, and then brought me a small hand-glass.

I wondered for the moment who it could be. A little thin face, with short, fair, curling hair above it, and strange bright eyes. This

was not my face at all. These were not my eyes. *They* had always been quiet and gentle-looking; these were large and brilliant, like those, alas! which I now suddenly recollected, but with the indistinctness that characterises our memory of dreams.

'Nurse,' I said, 'where is Miss Launceston?'

'Miss Launceston?' she repeated. 'Who is Miss Launceston, miss?'

It was evident she had never even heard her name. I turned wearily back to the contemplation of myself, and looked again into the glass, still wonderingly. I had always prided myself on my long hair. It had been like my mother's in luxuriance and beauty. When I had again realised thoroughly that it was certainly gone, I put the glass from me with a passionate gesture, and began crying and sobbing. In the midst of this paroxysm the door opened, and the missing visitor entered. But I still thought of nothing but my trouble. I con-

tinued crying without speaking to, or noticing him.

'What is the matter?' he asked in a quick, alarmed tone.

'Nothing much, sir. The young lady is fretting about her hair.'

He laughed so pleasantly that I began to feel ashamed of my emotion at once.

'Is it possible,' he said, 'that all these tears are shed for such a trivial cause? I thought a woman's tears more precious.'

'I am so grieved to see my head,' I pleaded.

'That is not my experience of most young people,' he answered. 'The greater number, I'll engage, take great pleasure as a rule in the sight of their own heads.'

'But it's my hair——'

'But that will grow again,' he said, looking at the new growth, and touching it lightly with his hand. 'It is getting thick already. Before the summer is gone it will be quite long. And it's a better colour than

before,' he went on. 'It's more golden, and brighter. Why should you grieve about that which will so soon be remedied?'

'Many of the dark beauties would give anything for it, wouldn't they, sir?' put in the old lady.

'I should think so, Nurse. But never mind any more about the hair. The question is, how is the poor patient to-day independent of it?'

'Quite well,' I said.

'Quite well?' he asked, laughing.

'Yes. It is getting up, I suppose. I feel quite recovered now.'

'I don't doubt you feel so for the moment, but you will soon find yourself even weaker than before if you exert yourself too much. I ought to make a little speech and congratulate you, ought I not?'

'Oh, no! Pray don't. It is I who ought to make one to you, to thank you for your goodness and kindness to me.'

'It's time you went to sleep again when

you begin to talk nonsense. Dr. Long said he thought you'd had enough of it—I mean sleep, not nonsense, you know.'

'Dr. Long!' I exclaimed.

'Yes; Dr. Long. Do you know him?'

'I knew a Dr. Long once,' I answered, hesitatingly. 'At the College, you know.'

'The identical man.'

'Is he here?'

'Not at present, madam. But I believe he contemplates the honour of visiting you to-morrow as usual.'

'He attended me when I had brain-fever, just when my dear mother died.'

'Indeed!' he said, smiling. 'And now he has had that pleasure a second time. Seriously, though, I wonder you have not recognised him. He is little altered from what he was ten years back.'

'I have never looked at him,' I answered. 'I could have told you he was an old gentleman, and that is all.'

'Very flattering to the old gentleman, I

must say. But we've had enough of doctors lately, for he brought several of his colleagues here to stare at you; suppose we talk of something else. When do you mean to go for a little drive with me?'

'A drive with you!'

'Yes; a drive with *me*. It will be quite proper, you know,' he added, with a humorous twinkle in his eyes. 'Nurse will go with us, nominally to take charge of her patient, in reality to satisfy the proprieties.'

'I should like to go so much!'

'Well, you can do so as soon as you like. At least, so that forbidden-to-be-mentioned medical practitioner said this morning. What do you say to to-morrow?'

'To-morrow? So soon? Oh, how delightful!'

'Very well. It's an agreement, then. You must coax Nurse to get you dressed and ready by eleven o'clock, and we'll start off and find out how the country looks.'

'Thank you,' I said; 'thank you very, very much.'

'You understand, Nurse?'

'Certainly, sir, if you say so.'

'Well, I most distinctly do say so, so mind you obey orders.'

'Yes, sir.'

'And now, has the patient anything more to say to me to-day before I vanish?'

'Yes; one thing. I have meant often to ask you, but have always forgotten it. How are Aura and Nellie, and your sister? And why has no one been to visit me but you?'

'Don't you like my society?'

'Yes; of course. But why do I not see anyone else?'

'Nurse has not been very communicative, I find.'

'She never speaks at all,' I complained, 'except when necessary, and will absolutely answer no questions.'

'Such was my orders, sir.'

'Nurse, you are invaluable, and I—I am a disgraced individual. I received precisely the same commands as yourself, but in ex-

tenuation of my conduct I must add that the restriction was lessened this morning. I was told I might converse with the patient in moderation——'

'Which it's been *im*moderation already, sir.'

'Just what I was about to remark, so I must really bring my pleasure to an end. With regard to the patient's enquiries,' he went on, turning to me, 'I must inform her before taking my leave, that the ladies in question are too far from here to render it expedient for them to adopt the practice of paying daily visits in this neighbourhood, they being at the present moment at Hastings.'

'At Hastings!' I exclaimed. 'But I fancied they must be away from home, for I thought I must for the last few days have been well enough for them to come and see me.'

'Oh, they're far enough away. Maternal instinct took alarm, and the mother flew off

with her chicks, leaving me on guard to see that you were taken care of.'

'How good you are!' I said.

'Not at all. It was necessary for some one to stay, and I did not dislike doing so. In fact, I preferred it.'

'But it was very kind still,' I said. 'You have always been kind to me ever since I first knew you.'

'You must think I am very fond of hearing my own praises.'

'No, I don't. But you've been so good to me that I cannot help telling you how grateful I am.'

'Very well. Now you've told me. But, remember, I am quite contented with one dissertation on the subject. Don't attempt another, or I shall follow my sister's example, and fly off.'

'You'd best do so now, for a time, sir,' interrupted the old nurse. 'You've stayed too long already. The young lady mustn't talk so much. She's quite tired now.'

'Oh, I forgot.'

'I'm not in the least tired.'

'So you say. But I must obey orders, and so must you. So good-bye at once.'

Then he went, and I began immediately to look forward to the next day.

The drive took place. It was bright summer now, and all things seemed as joyful as myself. I felt at rest. I lived in the present, and was happy. The fresh country air was to me as the breath of some glad, new life. My heart was full of thankfulness and gratitude, for I knew that, ere long, I should again walk about the world in health and strength. I had one side of the carriage to myself, where I lay back with many cushions to support me, and make the journey easy to me. Mr. Harrop and the old nurse were seated opposite. They spoke very little to me. Soon the air began to tire me strangely, and, in a moment, it appeared to me afterwards, I fell into a quiet dreamless sleep, which lasted till the drive was at an end.

'You are very strong indeed, are you not, my friend?' said Mr. Harrop as he almost lifted me from the carriage. I had, indeed, hardly realised till that moment how weak I was, and how severe my illness must have been.

The next day, and for many days after, punctually at eleven o'clock the same trio took their pleasant country drive—nothing varied but the road they went. I grew stronger and stronger, and returning health brought back some colour to my cheeks. I was for the most part thoroughly happy in the present, though oppressed at times with the consciousness that in all probability there would soon be an end to my happiness. 'When it is over,' I said to myself, calmly, 'the old despair and hopelessness will come back, and I shall see things once more in their true light.' And yet I hardly grieved at the prospect, for the present—the only certainty we have—was after all so dearly happy!

CHAPTER XXXIX.

It was a fair, bright morning at the end of August. The early mist had cleared away, and the sun was as undimmed and bright as in the first days of summer. I felt quite well now, and looked stronger and healthier than before my illness. The old nurse still slept in my room; but she had told me more than once that her task was over, and she was only waiting for the master to send her about her business, which she supposed he didn't mean to do till the mistress's return.

It wanted but a few days now to that, by me, dreaded event. Wondering whether my friend, Mr. Harrop, would be present to help me face the enemy, I had, after much reflection, asked him whether he was likely to start soon for his usual autumn tour; and he had

replied, with a curious smile on his face—caused, I believed, by surprise at my inquisitiveness—that he purposed leaving home immediately upon his sister's return, but where he should go depended entirely upon the success of a scheme which he had planned for some time past, but which, as yet, he had not had the courage even to commence carrying into effect. And so the subject had dropped.

It was early morning. I rose and dressed myself, for I was allowed now to get up as soon as I pleased; and, longing for the sweet fresh air, I went down into the grounds, intending to walk about quietly till summoned to breakfast. This meal was now always laid for me, as in former days, in the study, although I still continued to sleep in the spare bedroom which I had occupied during my illness.

I had been strolling down the paths thoughtfully for the space of ten minutes or so, when, raising my eyes from the ground,

where I had fixed them in a fit of musing, I saw Mr. Harrop walking towards me.

'How early we are!' he said, putting out his hand as he drew near me. 'What good fairy has been preaching to you?'

'The beauty of the morning,' I replied. 'But I am always out before breakfast.'

'So I have heard. What a wonderful person you are!'

'Not so wonderful as some one I know,' I answered—'some one who gallops off at seven o'clock A.M. every day without fail, and has been known not to appear again with his poor tired horse till nearly twelve.'

'*He's* not overworked, madam; so needs no pity. While his master is taking his—his —well, we'll say his first luncheon—or, if you like it better, his second breakfast—he gets well cared for and fed.'

'No doubt of it. But why has he a holiday on this particular morning?'

'I—I had something more important than —than riding on hand,' he said. Then, look-

ing at me earnestly, 'How changed you are from a few weeks back! Do you know your face now for the poor little shadow you saw in the glass the day you discovered the loss of your hair?'

'I know whom I have to thank that it is so different.'

'Ah! I'm no match for you,' he said, laughing. 'Do what I will, you can always manage a sentence of that kind when you've a mind for it. It serves me right, though, for giving you even the ghost of a chance; but I can't always be on guard.'

'Well, look out better another time,' I said. 'There's my breakfast-bell. Nurse rings it.'

'Never mind the bell, never mind your nurse, and never mind your breakfast. I want to speak to you.'

'Well, say on,' I answered.

'Not here,' he said. 'It can't be said standing. It's too long. And, as far as I am concerned, too important.'

I thought he was joking. 'It's something dreadful, that's clear.'

'You shall judge that when you hear. Now, take my arm, and we'll go into the summer-house and sit down.'

'I can get there without assistance,' I said, laughing. 'I'm not ill now, you know. You shall see me show my strength.' I walked off swiftly to the appointed spot, which was but a few yards off. He followed and took a seat by my side.

'Now,' I continued, 'what is this important affair? I can guess, I know. It's something about the children. They're going to school, I suppose; and I'm to have notice, as we call it. Mrs. Chanter has often threatened it; and, now I have thwarted her by falling ill, I have been expecting my dismissal every day.'

'Nothing of the sort,' he replied. 'It's nothing about the children at all, though it may possibly concern them later. It concerns only yourself at present,' he went on, with a

sort of hesitation in his manner that puzzled me. 'It is this.'

He stopped for some time, and then recommenced in such a grave tone that I seemed to have a dread of what was coming.

'It is this. I want to ask you—if you will be my wife?'

If the whole face of Nature had suddenly changed before my eyes from the glory of summer to the desolation of winter I could not have been more astonished.

'I—I don't understand,' I stammered. 'You—you are jesting.'

'Jesting!' he exclaimed. 'Do men usually jest upon such a subject? Should I insult you by such a jest? Think a moment.'

I had scarcely known what I had said, but everything seemed more possible than that I had heard aright, and that he had meant his words.

'Say again what you said. I—I don't think I heard correctly.'

'Will you be my wife?' he repeated, taking my hand. 'I do not think there is any mystery in my speech. My poor little child, I love you very dearly. You are to me more than anything on earth; and if the quiet pleasure of these days must indeed soon end, let it be to give place to—at least for me—a greater happiness.'

I could only sit silent and wonder vaguely. I seemed stunned as with a blow.

'You don't answer,' he said. 'Do you think I would not take care of you all your life? Or do you not wish me to do so?'

'Yes,' I said; 'it isn't that. Only I can't understand. It is too strange for me to realise all at once.'

'What is strange?'

'I—I don't know.'

'Poor little girl!' he said. 'Poor, desolate little girl! If you will do as I wish you shall never more be lonely or sad.'

I could only take his hands and cling to them, and let my tears fall upon them. The

joy seemed harder to me to bear than all the past had been.

'But this is still no answer,' he said. 'Why do you not speak?'

'Because I don't know what to say. I'm so glad—oh! so glad!'

'Then you love me?'

'Yes—always—always.'

'Poor child!' he said. 'If I did not appreciate your affection I should be bad indeed.'

Then through all my sudden happiness the memory of my lost friend struck me ruthlessly. I started back and dropped the hands I held.

'But *you* cannot love *me*,' I said, looking full at him. '*You* cannot love *me*. It—it is impossible!'

'Why so?'

'It is impossible!' I repeated. 'It is impossible!'

'But why impossible? It is a truth—I love you dearly. Have I not said so?

What more can I say? Do you think I would speak to you falsely?'

'Oh, no!' I said. 'You could not do that. But have you forgotten——' I could not say her name.

'All the past is—past,' he said, slowly. 'It is over—blotted out. It is to me as though it had never been. There is no grief nor pain to forget or conquer. When that happened to me which would have made some men blow out their own brains or some one else's, or both, it had this effect on me—I woke as from a dream! A dream which seemed upon my awaking to have been a happy one—but still only a dream, neither less nor more. The being I had loved and worshipped had existed but in my own imagination; she was not, as I had dreamed, embodied in Marion Launceston.'

He said her name so calmly, so entirely as if it were that of some slight acquaintance in whom he had taken not even a passing interest, that his words carried with them the

force of a truth that no mere assurances or argument could have taught me. I felt that now, and from henceforth, she who was once his chief desire was as dead to him as though she had never lived. I felt no pain nor sorrow at the thought of her—no pity for my friend—shut out in the darkness, while I basked in the light that once shone for her alone. I felt only a sensation as of rest after conflict. I felt only as though I had fought a mighty battle, and had ended conqueror.

'I have pained you,' I said, as he paused —'I have pained you by speaking of her.'

'How can that be? She is nothing to me. Her name is no more to me now than the name of any other woman. Why should it be otherwise?'

'Why indeed?' I said. And still in my selfish heart there was neither mistrust, nor fear, nor pity.

'My child,' he went on, gravely, 'there must be no mistake in all this. You must understand my meaning thoroughly. I will

illustrate it to you. Have you'—he hesitated a few moments—'have you ever read Bulwer's "Last of the Barons"?'

'Yes; only a short time before my illness.'

'Can you understand, then, the feelings of Adam Warner, the alchemist, when he discovered the cherished idea of his life to be but one great error? When he found that the fair Ureka of his heart—to others but a senseless mass of wood and steel—beautiful, indeed, but senseless and useless still—when he found that this fair thing was indeed what the world had deemed it;—when he realised that the priceless virtue he had fondly imagined it possessed was not only wanting then, but had never existed? Can you comprehend his feelings when this knowledge came to him?'

I made no answer.

'Do you think that at that supreme moment he still loved and cherished the creation of his heart? No! A thousand

times, No! The idol is broken; the deceived is undeceived. He is indifferent to —nay, he despises the object of his former worship. What does he now? What can any man so situated? He begins anew to rear and build—or his faith is dead for ever —and he rears and builds no more. Which is the better course?'

'The first,' I said, unhesitatingly.

'Such is my thought; and in accordance with it I have acted. I wept a moment for my mistake, but not for love of the cause of my mistake. And—and knowing all now, do you think it even possible for me to dim my joy in the fair present by regret and tears for the false past?'

'No,' I said; 'I see that you cannot do so.'

'The woman who deserted me,' he went on, 'is no more to me now than any other woman who could falsely say she loved and, in her double falseness, could betray the man she had deceived. She is simply nothing to

me. I am merely indifferent to her; and before I became indifferent to her I despised her. When the first shock of horror was over, love, regret, sorrow, in connection with her, had fled for ever.'

I recollected as he spoke that some great observer of human nature has said, 'A man never thoroughly unloves a woman till he has learnt to despise her,' and the recollection was pleasant to me. I felt a renewed certainty that every link which had chained my lover to the past was irremediably broken; and I continued to think of the first friend of my unloved girlhood—the dear friend of my womanhood—with as little pity and love as the man she had forsaken gave to her, and with a more eager and passionate sense of victory and triumph.

'Now my little Mary understands?'

'Yes,' I said, 'I understand now—I understand it all. Thank God, I see plainly!'

And so we remained silent for a long time—the dimness of our erring judgment

seeming to us like the brightest rays of noonday—thanking God for the darkness, and blindly calling it light. Oh! short-sighted and erring as those who are bereft of reason! Thanking God for the darkness and blindly calling it light!

CHAPTER XL.

As my agony had at times stunned me in former days so my happiness stunned me now. I could not at once and fully realise what had happened. The light was too dazzling. All Nature seemed to me to be touched with a sense of my new-born joy. The birds sang more sweetly. The air was purer and fresher. The trees and flowers more beautiful. Even the grass seemed to me fairer where my feet had been, as though I had the power of dispensing the blessedness which had fallen to my lot. I began to see now the use of the unhappy past. Its wretchedness and hopelessness had been the most fitting preparation for the present. 'How dim,' I said, 'had been the brightness but for the darkness it has dawned

upon! How faint the joy but for the bitterness of the despair!'

My dear friend had been planning the future for me, and telling me how to act. I had listened, thinking I should understand it all in time, but feeling that I was not, as yet, thoroughly roused to a clear perception of things in general and his instructions in particular.

'You know exactly what to do, my darling?'

'Yes, I hope so.'

'And you think it best?'

'Yes, if *you* think so.'

'And you are happy?'

'How strange,' I said, 'that you should ask me such a question!'

I knew he loved me, and yet it struck me at that moment that he looked upon me more as a child whom he pitied for her loneliness, and had resolved to protect and shelter, than as the woman upon whom all his hopes were centred, for he stroked my hair and said such

gentle words to me as a father might say to a petted child who had met with some trouble.

'Poor little girl! She will be happy now. No more loneliness nor sorrow, if I can drive them away.'

That night I saw my mother's face in dreams. It had a great happiness upon it. The reflection of mine, I thought. Then it grew brighter still with a light not of this world, smiled on me peacefully, and was gone.

The morning dawned, and I rose. I knew my dear friend would leave me for most of this day, but I knew also that he had told me how to occupy myself, and that the time would pass swiftly and pleasantly till his return. We breakfasted together, and with a tender farewell he went his way. Then I ascended to my little bedroom, which I had never entered since that fatal morning, which now seemed to me years ago. Passing through the schoolroom, I turned the handle of the door and went in.

I saw myself instantly lying there in despair! I saw *her* standing by my side begging forgiveness.

'O God!' I said aloud, 'where is she now? What has she done? Thou knowest!'

Thinking at that moment of my own great happiness—my own great happiness, contrasted with the agony which had filled my heart when last my feet had rested where they rested now—the first feeling of pity I had ever experienced for her since the calm white face of the man she had betrayed had told me the awful truth, dawned in my breast. The consciousness of being loved, that great purifier of the human heart, taught me for the moment the lesson of universal charity. Love requited gave me love for all, as love unrequited will fill some passionate natures with a sweeping hatred of all humanity. For the time I pitied her. I thought of her as she had been years ago when my eyes had first looked wonderingly upon her undeveloped beauty. 'She was like some fresh

unfolded flower,' I said, 'fair, but to be fairer still.' I thought of her in the rare loveliness of her girlhood, with the sweet, pure look upon her face which only girlhood wears. I thought of her in the peerless majesty of her womanhood, when the hearts of men unknown to me must have become desolate for her sake—and I pitied her. God was with me, and I pitied her. Then I thought of her making desolate the heart of one man *known* to me, and my whole soul revolted from her with passionate eagerness, and my hatred and anger returned with tenfold force.

'She was a fair devil,' I said. 'God made her beautiful that she might the more surely accomplish her mission of evil. God added beauty to her wondrous gifts that she might the more surely lead men to sin and despair. Let me thank Him that he whom I love was not wounded by her unto death!'

The memory of her warm, impulsive, generous nature had no power over me—the memory of a hundred noble actions, more

beautiful from the beautiful unconsciousness of their unselfishness on the part of their doer, had no power over me ; the innate conviction that many even now, knowing all the past, must still speak of her with tenderness and love—love, born of rare faith in her—love, born of admiration of her own loving nature —love, born of gratitude—love, mixed now in every thought of her with sorrow and divinest pity—had no power over me. I hated and scorned her. No relenting mingled with my hatred—no slightest sympathy with my scorn and contempt.

Why had she acted as she had acted ? What evil-doer like herself had she fled with ? 'What does it concern me ?' I said aloud. 'I will never voluntarily know more than I know now.' Then I tried to shake from my thoughts all present memory of her—longing as I did so, though knowing how vain such a desire must be—that it were possible to me to forget her in time for ever, as though she had never lived. Then I went

from the room, and began the duties of the day.

All were completed when my friend returned to dinner—according to arrangement. To my surprise this meal passed almost in silence. Then came a walk in the grounds. Still silence. Beyond asking me if all had been arranged as we both had wished my companion made no reference of any kind either to the present or the future. A few gentle loving words had not been wanting; and yet I feared and dreaded—I knew not what.

'Are you tired to-night?' I at length asked, timidly.

'No, not at all. But I am silent because I am thinking—thinking of events and circumstances for the most part unknown to you; though truly the only subjects which should, by right, now engage my thoughts are yourself and your needs. Are you warm out here, my child?'

'I am quite warm,' I said.

'It wouldn't do for you to take cold now and become ill again, would it?'

'No,' I answered, laughing, and the undefined dread passed from my mind.

'Well, as I have a few words to say to you, which I think it best should be said at once, we'll avoid all danger by taking our seat in the summer-house, as we did yesterday. It is sheltered there, and we can get our little converse over without delay.'

So we walked through the grounds, and took the seat we had occupied the morning before. How distant that time appeared now! It seemed years and years ago. The days before it appeared to me as specks in some remote distance which it was beyond my power to fathom.

'Now, my child, you must listen attentively, though it need be but for a short time. May I trust you to do so?'

I put my hand in his for an answer.

'In the first place, then, you are quite contented that things should be—as they are?'

'Contented?' I said. 'Contented? That is not the word to use.'

'Well, you are pleased—happy?'

'Yes,' I said, 'I am very, very happy.'

'Poor little girl!' he said, sighing. 'I am only too glad that it is so. You indeed deserve it, if it really is such happiness to you as you say.'

No memory of her came over me to contradict his words. I merely for the time believed I did deserve it, even as we so often imagine our 'strokes of good luck,' as we call them, are simply rewards of merit, when truly if we had our deserts we should be 'sitting in dust and ashes.'

'But now for what I have to say,' he continued. 'Listen earnestly and answer me. I —I scarcely know how to put the question—but before you become my wife, my dear and cherished wife,' he added—it seemed to me as though to accustom himself to the word—'my dear and cherished wife, do you not wish to know more than you know already—as much as—as—as I know, for instance, about'—he

hesitated a moment, and then brought the words out abruptly and swiftly, as though he could not trust himself to pronounce them like other words—'about your friend's disappearance and——'

'No!' I broke in, passionately, almost starting from my seat. 'I wish to hear nothing respecting it. I wish to know no more than I do know. Upon this subject let there be silence between us for ever.'

He looked at me for a moment as though lost in astonishment.

'Hush! hush! do not speak so impetuously.'

'Promise me,' I said, 'that you will never speak of this again. I cannot bear it.'

'As you will, dearest. I will promise anything you like. I will never speak of it to you again after to-night.'

'And not even again to-night,' I pleaded; 'not even one more word.'

'Not of *that*,' he urged, 'but of *her*. I must speak now. It is a question, and I *must* ask it.'

'Speak quickly, then,' I said.

'It is this. The night before—the night before you were taken ill—did she not come to your room to see you?'

'Yes, she came. Do not ask me any more.'

'I *must* do so. What did she say to you?'

'What did she say?' I stammered.

'Yes. Do you not remember?'

'She said a great deal,' I replied, scarcely knowing how to answer him.

'Did she speak of me?'

'No, not once. Your name never passed her lips.'

'And do you think that at the time she was with you she—she had any intention of —of acting as she did?'

'I can't tell,' I said. 'How *should* I tell?'

'But do you *think* she had?'

'Certainly not. From what passed between us I should think that nothing was

farther from her thoughts than taking the course she did take.'

He waited a moment after my reply, and then, putting his hand in his pocket, brought out a memorandum-book. This he opened, and taking from it a small folded paper, gave it to me.

'Read that—read it at once. It was in the letter-box, addressed to me. It was found there the same morning.'

I opened it, and read the following words in the well-remembered bold, clear hand:—

'When your eyes rest on this they will have rested upon me for the last time. Do not try to falsify these words, because any sight of me in the future, knowing of me what you must now suspect, would drive you mad. I can't help laughing when I think what blind fools men are—you among the rest. Don't believe for the future in clever, handsome women. They are only made to teach men the lesson I have taught you.

'MARION LAUNCESTON.'

The paper dropped from my hands. He laughed quietly.

'You do not wonder now that forgetfulness was such an easy lesson?'

'I can never wonder again,' I said. 'I should not wonder if even you left me as she left you.'

'But *I* should,' he said; '*I* should wonder, my poor little innocent child.'

My mind did not misgive me for a moment. I was blinded with the awful blindness of a selfish heart.

As he spoke he picked up the paper, tore it into pieces, and, again placing it on the ground, took a fusee from his pocket, set fire to the little heap, and watched it calmly till it was consumed. Then he put his foot on the ashes.

'There!' he said. 'So perish all the miserable past!'

'Why did you not destroy it before?' I exclaimed. 'Why did you keep such words? How could you carry them about with you?'

'I kept them, thinking to do so only until I could fully realise their meaning, for they seemed to me upon my first reading them as senseless and idle as—as the summer wind. Then, when I at length thoroughly understood them, I had found another reason for keeping them, and that was to show them to you.'

'I am glad to have seen them,' I said. 'They make me feel even more strongly than I have hitherto done that I can look forward to a future with no misgiving nor regret to mar its happiness.'

'A few more words,' he said, 'and then all reference to the unhappy past will be over. Look at me, my child. Look in my face, for your answer to this last question is of more importance to me than anything else.'

I obeyed, and fixed my eyes on him steadily.

'Answer me with the knowledge full upon you that you are speaking before God. Is there anything—anything at all—known to

you which, if known to me, would make me regret the step I have taken in asking you to be my wife?'

I did not in the least understand him.

'I was respectably born,' I said. 'My father——'

He laughed carelessly.

'That is not what I mean,' he interrupted. 'I have been told by others all your—pedigree, we will call it—and if your father had been hanged for murder I would still marry you, if I knew you to be—if I knew you to be—the dear, innocent girl I *do* know you to be,' he added, suddenly and rapidly, and with a vehemence that made me start back. 'There is something that happened once,' he went on, more quietly, but with a curious hesitation in his voice and manner, 'something which I cannot tell you, because of—of one who is connected with it. It concerned you—I mean the words that were said to me concerned you—and at the time they were said I scarcely heeded them, and indeed

doubted if I even heard them aright. But this morning they came suddenly back to me, and I knew from events which have transpired since they were spoken that I *did* hear them aright. Since they came back to me I seem to have heard nothing else till I looked at your innocent face a moment ago, and saw the answer to my shameless question stamped upon it.'

I was so bewildered that I could have made no reply even if it had been necessary to do so. I could only look at him, vaguely wondering what he meant.

'Now,' he said, 'we will have done with the past. But first tell me—you have never loved any man but myself—I am right in this?'

'I have never loved another,' I answered. 'You are all to me. I gradually learned to love you from the first moment I saw you. I—I don't know what you meant,' I added; 'but indeed I know of nothing that should make you unlove me, unless it is my brother Louis.'

'Your brother! I did not know you had a brother. What of him?'

'He ran away from us—my mother and me. We never saw him again. He was drowned.'

'Poor lad!' he said, 'poor lad!'

'I thought you might think it a disgrace to me?'

'Think what a disgrace?'

'That he should have deserted us, as it were. It broke my mother's heart.'

'That is sad,' he said, 'but cannot disgrace *you*. The ill-doing of those related to us can bring no real disgrace upon ourselves. God forbid that it should. For if it were so who among us would be clean?'

'Then you know there is nothing that should separate us?'

'Separate us! Great God! what should separate us?'

'You said a little while ago——'

'Forget what I said,' he interrupted, hurriedly, as though only just realising my

meaning. 'Forget it for ever. For the moment I was mad. There's a devil in my heart sometimes, even now, and—and I believe nothing. It shall be your part, my gentle friend, to exorcise it, till I shall be at length at rest, "clothed, and in my right mind."'

'Are you not in your right mind now?' I said, laughing gaily. 'To me you are the wisest being in the world. To me you are the tenderest, truest, noblest-natured man living. I have always thought so—always. Since the moment you first tried to help me, poor, friendless creature that I was. Now God has given my friend to me for ever—a greater gift He could not give.'

As I looked at him, I saw that his eyes were filled with tears. He took my hand, and kissed it with a kind of reverence that seemed to me more touching than the fondest caress could have been

'And you,' he said, 'what of you? May God heap tenfold on me all the misery of the

past, if I fail one jot in all the future in my duty to you.'

I kissed his hand in return, with a happy laugh.

'Now, wiseacre,' I said, 'I have some questions to ask *you*.'

'Ask on,' he said.

'I want you to answer this. What made you first think of loving me?'

He laughed as gaily as myself now. 'Shall I tell the truth?' he said.

'Certainly.'

'You'd better not insist upon an answer, then.'

'And why?'

'Because it will surprise you greatly.'

'And unpleasantly?'

'I can't tell. But you certainly couldn't guess it.'

'I'm not going to try. You must tell me. You promised to answer, you know.'

'And so I will if you wish it.'

'I do wish it.'

'Don't blame me, then. Well, the first cause of my loving you was—that *you* loved *me*.'

The burning colour rushed to my face. 'Because *I* loved *you*?' I stammered.

'Exactly so. Has curiosity met its reward?'

'But even allowing that I did love you—mind, I don't say that I did—but allowing that I did love you before you loved me—how could you have known it?'

'Because you told me.'

'I—told—you!'

'Certainly. You told me with your own lips.'

I could not understand. Had he said that in the past he had suspected my feeling for him—that, in a hundred ways, I had, unknowingly, betrayed it—I might not have doubted his words. But how was I to believe this?

'Do you wish to know when you told me?'

'You are jesting,' I said. 'I never did tell you.'

'Yes, truly. You told me when you were ill.'

I began to understand now. I trembled and shook with agitation and shame.

'My darling,' he said, taking my hand, 'there is no cause for this. On the contrary, there is every cause that we should both be thankful that you betrayed to me that which I might, unhappily, never have known or even have dreamed of, had you not given me the knowledge. You are happy in the present, and yet would undo the act which led to its happiness. I will tell you how it all came to pass. When you were first attacked with your terrible illness, I raised you from the ground where you had fallen, and placed you on a couch in the drawing-room. Then I left you with my sister, in order to see that a medical man was sent for immediately. I returned to the room to find that your keeper had fled, and I went to

seek her, summoning a servant whom I knew to be trustworthy to take charge of you till better assistance should arrive.'

'How kind and good you always are!'

'Very. Well, I found my sister in her dressing-room, and in a most abject state of terror, fearing, not for your safety, but for that of herself and the children.'

'"What is the matter with her, Charles."

'"I cannot say."

'"It's not a common fainting fit, I can see that by her eyes and the expression of her face——"

'"I can see the same," I said.

'"What is it, then? Do you wish me and the children to become infected? Directly I had examined her I left the room at once. What is the matter with her?"

'"I cannot tell. One thing I know, and that is that she is seriously ill, probably with an attack similar to one with which I remember she was afflicted many years ago, when she was at the college. I fear ——"

'"I shall take the children away immediately."

'"That you can do as you please about. Doubtless the quieter the house is kept the better."

'"I shall go to Hastings," she said, "by the afternoon train, and we must start for the junction at once. Anything to get away from this disgraced and desecrated house. Thank goodness there is now more than sufficient reason for leaving it. Will you be ready in half-an-hour?"

'The utter heartlessness of her words struck me, in spite of my knowledge of her character, with such intense amazement, that I stood looking at her without answering.

'"Will you be ready in half-an-hour?" she repeated. I felt that to condescend to argue with her selfishness would be useless.

'"Margaret," I said, "you must really for once endeavour to trust yourself with Josiah" (that's our model coachman, you know) "as far as the station."

'"And you will join us there?"

'"Certainly not."

'"What do you mean? You cannot *dare* to mean that you are not going with us."

'"Nevertheless, Madam, that is what I *do* mean."

'You are going to stay here!"

'"I am going to stay here."

'"Do you absolutely decline accompanying *me*?"

'"I have said so, and that is enough. When this poor friendless girl is deserted by you, who are bound, at this juncture, by every tie of your woman's nature, to act towards her the part of a mother, it only remains for me to take your place and see that she is not neglected."

'"There is the nurse, Charles."

'"I shall stay here," I repeated.

'Upon which my sister informed me,' he continued, with an amused smile on his face, 'that I was very considerably too good for this world (I can't recollect her exact words),

at least, I was so in my own opinion, but that she had heard that a friend of hers had described me as a cross between a prig and a Methodist parson, and she must acknowledge that her view of my character was more in accordance with his than with my own, &c., &c. I bowed in reply, and in twenty minutes' time mother and chicks had disappeared. I returned to the drawing-room, and on the arrival of the doctor and nurse saw you carefully removed to a large airy bedroom. I left you with your new guardians, and made my way to the dining-room, not knowing why I went, or what I should do next. I am sorry to say that in a few moments I found myself pondering on the expediency of drinking half-a-pint or so of brandy for the purpose of deadening for a time the strange and hitherto almost unrealised agony that seemed returning with tenfold force, now that the necessity for attending to your wants had passed away. I went to the sideboard, and had already my hand on what I sought to obtain, when a

knock at the door interrupted me, and as I turned to see who entered, a quick shame of my weakness seized me, and I resolved at all events to keep my reason. The almost welcome intruder was your medical attendant.

'"What ails your patient," I asked.

'"She is still insensible, and I fear there will be brain fever. She is of an excitable temperament, and I should imagine there has been some weight on her mind which she has probably endured for some time."

'Then a long conversation ensued, needless to detail to you. He explained that he could say nothing as to your chances of life until the next few days were over, but that in all probability delirium would soon take the place of your present unconsciousness. And then he wished me "Good-morning."

'Once more alone, I determined not to be again tempted to any rash act which I should afterwards regret. I resolved to go up at once to your room to charge the nurse to do her utmost for you, and then take a

long country ride, and think of anything—if possible—but that one thing. When I arrived at the door of your apartment, I saw that it was open. In another glance I perceived that you were lying, to all appearance still unconscious, on the bed, and that the nurse, who I felt certain ought not to have left you alone for an instant, had either in her carelessness gone off for a gossip—there was now plenty of subject matter in the house for that amusement, I thought, bitterly—or found some more tangible excuse for neglecting her charge. I felt at the moment such great pity for you, that I passed into the room almost unconsciously, and bending over you, examined your face as though you were my own child. I touched your hot forehead with my hand, and, as I did so, you spoke. The words you said were so strange— to me, for the instant, so unbelievable—that, as they fell from your lips, my hand slipped from your brow, and I stood looking down upon you with dumb wonder and amazement.

Every sentence you uttered struck me like a blow. The memory of the words I have just now destroyed was still searing my brain like fire, but as you spoke that memory died away, and that of those you had said remained in its place. My heart had been turned into gall and bitterness—but, as I looked upon you a gentler feeling possessed me. Your words were those of one bereft for the time of reason—the wild utterances of delirium—and yet, I said to myself, they are, perhaps, the words of truth. I still listened, and still wondered. Till, at length, in my wonder and recklessness, I spoke aloud——

'"All women are liars," I said. "They are false, deceitful, ungrateful, and heartless. Truth is foreign to their nature. But this woman may now be speaking truth, for, in her madness, she knows not what she utters. Why should it not be truth?" I said. "It *is* truth—for she knows not to whom she speaks it, or even that she speaks it at all. She may tell me in the future that she loves

me not—but I shall know she lies—I shall not be deceived."

'Though I believed firmly, for the time, in this perversion of reason—though the resolution I formed as I gazed upon you was so fixed, that to many men in my position it would have brought a sensation of ease and rest, if not of gladness or triumph for the time—I felt scarcely any alleviation of my pain. I kissed your forehead gravely, as a seal to my determination, and then left the room. After ensuring, beyond a doubt, that proper care and attention would be shown you, I ordered my horse, and galloping to the station, took the next train to London, intent upon persuading Dr. Long to come down and do his utmost to save your life, remembering he had attended you through a similar illness years back, and therefore probably "understood your constitution," as doctors call it. Luckily, I found him at home. When I had exhausted every argument I could think of, wearied with my importunity he at last gave

in, and consigning his patients to the care of a friend, consented to take up his quarters here until such time as you should be either convalescent or beyond his help. For many days he despaired of your life. I had time to think, then. My morbid fancies became less strong; and when at length it became certain that you would, in time, be the same healthful, gentle girl as of old, I knew that God had been very merciful to me, and I began to trust that your future words to me would be the same as those uttered in the ignorance of your madness. "At all events," I said, "I will not long delay my knowledge of them. It may be natural to her, as to so many women, to lie when she is in health, to be false when she has her reason, and if she denies her love for me, she may go her way, but I shall still know that, in denying it, she lies, and that once she spoke the truth. If again she speaks it, she shall be my wife."

'As the days passed on, even this perverted state of mind gave place to calm sense

and discretion. I felt certain, by degrees, that that which you had so unwittingly told me without question on my part, you would certainly repeat to me when I sought the confession, and I looked forward to the future, and was happy.'

He paused, but I could not speak. I had buried my face in my hands, and was crying quietly.

'Was I not right, my poor little constant child?'

Still I could not speak. Then he took my hand, drew it quietly through his arm, and walked with me to the house.

CHAPTER XLI.

In the morning I rose early, as I had engaged to do. Upon entering the dining-room, I found my future husband there before me.

When the first greetings were over he glanced at me with an amused expression. 'You *heard* the arrival last night?'

'Who could fail to hear it?' I answered, laughing. 'It would have woke the Seven Sleepers, I should think, whoever they may have been. But I have seen nothing of the children, as I expected.'

'No. I knew you were tired, so charged them strictly not to make a noise near your room, nor to come to you till you met them down here this morning. You don't ask me how my sister behaved.'

'No, but I want to know. What did she say?'

'Well, details are nothing. But she will do as I wish.'

'And the children?'

'It's all arranged as we proposed. Do you know Dr. Long came down last night?'

'Dr. Long?' I exclaimed.

'Yes, Dr. Long. He's to be your father, you know.'

'I know nothing of the kind. At least I did not know it till now.'

'Oh dear, yes! He promised me to officiate in that responsible capacity long back.'

'You seem to have been pretty certain of the success of your plans, I think.'

'Well, I was. To tell you the truth, I don't think Dr. Long——'

At this juncture the door opened, and the subject of our conversation entered the room. He started upon seeing it already occupied.

'Well, upon my word! I hardly expected

such early rising! But I won't disturb you. Only just say "good morning," you know, and congratulate the bride!'

He came up to me and kissed me on the forehead, in his grave, old-fashioned way.

'There, now I'm off.'

'Not at all! At least, I'm off with you then. I have to run into the village to see after something I've forgotten; and if you'll come with me, it will give me the opportunity of saying a few words to you alone, for the last time in my bachelor life! Mary will stay here. You had better remain in this room, I think,' he added, hesitatingly, turning to me. 'I would not leave you even for a moment, if I could avoid it, but I shall be back very shortly—in ten minutes at the most—long before my sister is likely to put in an appearance. Good-bye for the present.

I stood at the window and nodded to them, as they went out at the gate; then turning my head, I saw with unpleasant surprise that Mrs. Chanter was in the room. For the

moment, I was too confused to speak. I remember I had some indistinct idea that she must have been lying in wait in some adjoining hiding-place, and I have not much doubt now but that that idea was correct.

'Good morning, Miss Browne,' she said, in a tone that implied she imagined me to have lost my senses, or I could not have failed to greet her immediately upon her appearance with the respect due to her position.

'Good morning,' I answered. I had quite recovered myself by this time. 'Good morning, Mrs. Chanter.'

There was on her face the same look of placid indifference which it usually wore, though the memory of it, as I had last seen it, white with stifled anger, came vividly to my mind as my glance fell upon it. She made no enquiry about my health, but walked across the room and took her seat at the head of the breakfast-table, with the languid air and manner I so well remembered.

'It's a fine morning,' I ventured presently.

'Is it?' she answered. 'I really have not noticed.'

'I hope you had a pleasant journey yesterday.'

To this she made no reply, so I again turned to the window, and looked out. Presently she spoke of her own accord.

'Can you tell me, Miss Browne, whether that madman has come downstairs yet?'

'Now for it,' I thought. 'Which madman, Mrs. Chanter?'

'There is only one in the house that I know of,' she answered. 'I certainly don't mean your valuable friend Dr. Long. *He's* not going to marry his sister's cook, or governess, or whatever it is, is he?'

'She is evidently bent,' I said to myself, 'upon making the most of her ten minutes,' for I was convinced now that she knew as much of her brother's movements as I did. I felt intuitively she would never have dared

to attack me, unless she had known for a certainty that he was not in the house. I would not humour her by walking out of the room, nor would I play into her hand by answering her. I merely turned from her as she finished speaking, and resumed my study of the landscape, as though much interested in its beauties. She remained silent for some time, then probably deciding that she could never draw me into conversation unless she spoke to me civilly, at length addressed me in almost a friendly tone of voice.

'You never answered my question, Miss Browne. Has my brother come downstairs yet?'

I felt bound to reply to this. 'Your brother, Mrs. Chanter, has gone to the village with Dr. Long,'—'as well you know,' I added mentally.

'Oh! indeed. I only wish he would have the sense not to come back again.'

'Now,' said I to myself, 'I have made a mistake in answering. I will keep to my

first resolution and remain perfectly silent.' I comprehended exactly how matters stood. This would be probably the only opportunity she would ever have of revenging herself on me, as far as personal insults were concerned, and she was determined to take advantage of it. It was also probably the only opportunity I should ever have of showing her that I despised both herself and her innuendoes; therefore, I decided upon following her example, and also taking advantage of it. So I entirely ignored her last remark, and again resumed my study of the surrounding country.

'I forgive him,' she went on, 'because he is heart-broken about that other wretched woman, and will never get over it. Men of his temperament only know what love is once in their lives, and if disappointed, they invariably turn off as he has done, and become the prey of some artful low-born minx. I might have known what would happen when he prevailed upon me to leave him here alone!'

Still no reply.

'Why don't you answer?' she said. 'Why don't you tell me how you entrapped and inveigled him? Are you too much ashamed of yourself to speak?'

Still not a word. I saw with delight that my silence irritated her more than speech would, and seeing this, tortures would not have drawn a syllable from me.

'In times past,' she said, 'I invariably knew you for a chattering magpie. But now I see that when necessary, you are cunning enough to keep your remarks to yourself.'

I could tell by the tone of her voice that in the fury of the moment she scarcely knew what she said. I had a difficult matter to keep from laughing, but not wishing to make matters worse than they were, resolved to control myself.

'And those tender little angels I entrusted to your care. Thank Heaven they were not old enough, and not long enough with you, to become imbued with your bad prin-

ciples and deceit. Thank Heaven they will never ——'

I had seen him coming up the garden, but would not interrupt her. Now he opened the door and walked in.

'Good morning, Margaret. What is the matter?'

He looked at her as he spoke, then at me. There was nothing to be read in *my* face, so he turned to hers again. 'What is it?' he said. 'What are you thanking Heaven so vehemently for?'

She took no notice. Dr. Long entering the room at the moment, she fixed her eyes on him, and slightly bowed her head.

'Good morning, Doctor.'

'Good morning, Mrs. Chanter.'

'I trust you rested well after your long journey. What a lovely morning, is it not? Charles, may I trouble you to ring the bell?'

What conclusion the individual she addressed eventually arrived at as to the cause of his sister's agitation I never knew, but at

this point he gave up his scrutiny of her face, and quietly obeyed orders. In a few moments more we were all taking our breakfasts, a sort of running fire of chit-chat being kept up incessantly, mainly by Dr. Long and Mrs. Chanter.

In the midst of the repast down rushed the children, and entering the room with a bound, regardless of the presence of a stranger, to say nothing of their mother and uncle, without essaying a greeting to anyone else, they threw their arms round me, and hugged me till I was fairly tired out.

'You dear darling! Are you quite well again? What are you down here for? Aren't you going to have breakfast with us? What are you having it here for? Uncle Charles told us to come straight to this room after you, directly we were dressed. What does it all mean?' With half-a-dozen other questions and exclamations in the same breath.

'Aura.'

'Yes, Uncle Charles.'

'Come and sit down. You can take your breakfast here this morning, both you and Nellie. But go and speak to your mamma first.'

'Ungrateful children,' said that lady, in a calm paroxysm of maternal jealousy. 'Ungrateful children! To love your governess better than your mother!'

Aura's prétty little face was laid against the speaker's in a moment.

'It isn't that, mamma dear. We don't really love her best, but till lately we've seen so much more of her.'

The words were only too true, but the painful meaning in them was lost upon the mother. She put her elder daughter away from her, embraced the younger, and motioned them to take their seats at the table, which after a kind word and a shake of the hand from the old doctor, they gladly did.

'Where's Edward, Aura?' I asked.

'At Hastings, Brownie dear. He's at a farm-house there. Mamma says he's so

delicate that he had better stay by the sea another month. But he looks fatter than Nellie and I look, doesn't he, Nellie?'

'Silence, miss, this instant,' said outraged maternity. Dr. Long glanced at the little culprit, with an expression on his face which would not have pleased her reprover had she chanced to see it.

'Oh! I don't mind his being there, mamma. We're glad enough of it, aren't we, Nellie? We only hope he'll stay till it's time for him to go back to school, and then we shall get a little peace.'

'Young people who breakfast with me, Aura, must not speak unless they're spoken to.'

'Yes, Uncle Charles.'

Miss Aura's voice was heard no more until the meal was ended. She merely fixed her eyes patiently on her uncle, at intervals, till he rose from the table.

'What's going to happen now, uncle?'

He put up his finger to silence her. 'You

will see that the children are ready, Margaret?'

'That is the duty of their maid. Aura and Nellie, you can both go upstairs now and stay in the schoolroom. Nurse is there, I dare say, or will be presently. Tell her to dress you in your walking things, and send you down here at half-past ten.'

'I will go up with you,' I said. 'I think——'

'You need not leave us yet,' their uncle interrupted.

'I would rather do so,' I urged. And he bowed and opened the door, and I passed out with the children.

'Where are we going at half-past ten, Miss Browne?'

'You'll see when the time comes.'

'Are you going too?'

'I hope so. Now be good children. Sit here quietly till nurse comes to dress you, and when it is time to start, knock at my door.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Have I not to dress as well as yourselves?'

'Oh! I forgot that.'

I kissed them both, went to my room, and shut myself in. There was one short hour for me to spend alone on this my marriage morning. I sat down, and tried to think. But two short days ago, and I was a lonely, almost friendless girl, and now—this great happiness. No dream of the truth came over me to mar my joy, or cloud the exultation of my heart. The minutes passed like seconds. I could not think calmly. My mind seemed too dazed and confused to be capable of reflection. The hour was nearly passed. I dressed myself in haste; then looked for the last time in my little dressing-glass at the once pale, quiet face, now beautiful and radiant with happiness. I seemed to rejoice in, and love it, because he whom I loved held it dear. I could scarcely understand my own feelings as I gazed upon it, but

at length I gave up my scrutiny with a happy smile. At that moment the expected summons came to the door, and I passed into the schoolroom. Taking a hand of each of the now silent children, who were, I saw, looking at me wonderingly, I went on with them towards the drawing-room. As we descended the stairs the silence was explained. Aura put her head close to mine.

'Is it true?' she whispered. 'Nurse says you and Uncle Charles are going to be married. Is it true?'

'Quite true,' I whispered in return.

'But where is Aunt Marion?'

'You must not speak of her,' I said, hurriedly. 'You will never see her again. Have you forgotten what you uncle said?'

'No,' she answered, gently forcing me to stand still on the landing, while Nellie listened with wide-open eyes. 'No, I have not forgotten it. I am very fond of you, Brownie, but I love Aunt Marion better. I will never believe she could do anything

wicked. You couldn't, any of you, have loved her as Nellie and I do, or you would never have turned against her and say we are not to speak of her. We *do* talk about her when we're alone together.'

'Yes, that we do,' added Nellie, eager to put in her word. 'We often talk of her, and we always agree that there must be a mistake somewhere, and that if it's true she ran away from everybody, she must have had good reason for it. Aura and I made up our minds long ago not to hear a word against her, and not to believe anyone who said she was not good. There's something not right somewhere.'

'Very probably,' I answered. But I did not think at the moment how the eyes of men and women are clouded by the mists of years, and how the eyes of children, undimmed by prejudice and error, can see at once the truths that to us are false and hidden. The sweet, pure faith of childhood passes quickly from us. I could not, at the time,

even perceive the beauty of the trust I did not feel.

We entered the drawing-room without further remark. Mrs. Chanter was present in elegant morning costume. Her brother and Dr. Long were chatting with her; every one, to my great relief, in apparent good humour. The latter offered me his arm, and we passed in silence through the hall, to a carriage waiting for us. The remainder of the party followed in another. And at the little village church, in the quiet autumn morning, with the sweet-scented breeze whispering through the open windows, the unreal day-dream of my girlhood was realised, the one passionate wish of my youth was accomplished —I became the wife of the man I loved.

CHAPTER XLII.

I WAS happy. So happy that the light that I had noticed in my face for the first time on that last morning at 'The Laurels' had never left it—had become a part of its expression, as though Nature not joy had placed it there. Morning, noon, and night the same happiness, even my dreams were tinged with it, as the sun sheds light on all things. It seemed to me at times that it was too great, too perfect always to endure, and a quick sudden dread would come over me, lest it should slip from my grasp, and leave me doubly desolate; but this strange fear would live but for a moment. It would pass as it came, and again no shadow, nor dream of change.

We had made the tour of Europe. Like

a gay living panorama its glories had spread before us. Fair cities, noble rivers, stupendous mountains—all the wonders of nature, unclouded and unsullied, all the triumphs of art, radiant with man's victory. We had lingered beneath the shadow of the Alps, we had wandered through the Eternal City, we had sailed on the waters of the fairest river of God's earth; but though to me were displayed the most mighty wonders and the minutest beauties of creation, no knowledge, no delight, was so precious to me as the thought that the heart of this man who was with me was mine alone. In other things the world had a share, in other joys others had a part; but this was my very own, my undivided possession. I loved myself that it was so—I loved myself, because in his eyes I was so precious.

Months passed away, and at length our pleasant journeying was over. I had told myself that my child should not draw its first breath in a foreign land; so, as there was no

home prepared for me, my husband secured us a temporary one in a quiet secluded English village. There I learnt that, however great may be the happiness of a wife, no bliss is like the bliss of a young mother who holds in her arms her first-born child. All the joy of my life now seemed changed into a calm and holy peace. I was happier than I had ever imagined it possible for any woman to be.

When the sweet baby daughter grew stout and strong, we left its birthplace and came nearer London. My husband, who still held some monetary interest in the old home of my girlhood—the memory of which seemed now to me a blessed one, because within its walls I had first seen his face—thought it expedient, for some short time at least, to be near the neighbourhood where it was situated. So we rented a house some little distance from it, and I began to settle down into quiet, every-day life. 'The romance of my youth,' I said, 'is ended now;' and I concluded I had nothing to do but to

set up, for the rest of my days, as a loving and trusting wife and mother.

. . . . .

Another happy year passed away. Alas! the happiest of my life. Never again can dawn for me, in this world, a time of such perfect rest and peace. The shadow of the trouble that succeeded it will always remain to dim the brightest of my joys, to sully my purest moments of pleasure; and yet I know truly that my lot is still a favoured and a blessed one.

At the end of this happy year we still lived in the house we had chosen after leaving the birthplace of our child. The little feet could now trot about the house, the little voice say our names with its sweet baby lisp. She was a strong, healthy-looking little creature, not, as in the first few months of her life, thin and delicate; and beyond exaggerating her infant ailments into diseases of deadly power, after the manner, I believe, of all young mothers, I never really felt any

anxiety about her. But at the end of this happy year, through her came the first trouble of my married life. A slight cold, ending in fever and convulsions, laid her upon a bed of sickness, and for many days and nights I tended her, the awful fear of losing her weighing heavily upon my heart. As soon as her father had anticipated danger he had secured the services of our dear friend, who had twice saved the mother's life; but for many weeks he despaired of ultimately preserving that of her child.

It was a fair, bright autumn morning, and I sat gazing steadily at the poor little worn face of my baby. A great hope was in my heart, for the dear old doctor, who had just left me by my sleeping child, had told me that when she should wake she would in all probability recognise her mother, and that if she did so, I might know for certain that her life was safe. I have learned since that he already knew that it was so; but feared the excess of my joy might be hurtful to me, if the

good news came to me too suddenly. He was now downstairs talking to my husband, whose health had been suffering the last few days, doubtless from over-anxiety and care for his wife and child. At length I heard him leave the house, and a few moments after my husband himself entered the room.

'Mary,' he said quietly, after gazing at the little one for a few moments, 'Dr. Long says you are to take one of your cooling draughts, and lie down for a few hours. The child may not wake till evening, and Nurse can watch for you, and rouse you directly she does so. He says you must take rest to-day, or he will not answer for the consequences. He seems quite certain as to the beneficial effects of this sleep for the poor baby, so you need feel no more anxiety.'

'We cannot *know* that she will live, Charles,' I said reproachfully.

'We *know* nothing,' he answered; 'but we can at least trust in God, and regulate our ideas by the opinion of those wiser

than ourselves. If you should make yourself ill, there will be greater trouble in the house than there has even hitherto been. You must do as we wish. Where is your draught? I will mix it for you, and you must then take your needful rest.'

'I have only one left,' I said, wearily, 'and that is in my desk. It is in a little folded paper, you know.'

'In your desk? Why should you keep them there?'

'I don't keep them there. Only one day Nurse gave me two by mistake, and as I was using my desk at the time, I left the one I did not require inside it, for safety.'

'Is your desk locked?'

'Oh, of course. Here is the key.' I took it from my purse, where I always kept it, and handed it to him. And he left the room on his errand—an errand, alas! fraught for both of us with another of those sorrows which the great Master has so truly told us, 'come not as spies, but in battalions.'

When he was gone, I rose from my seat and knelt down by the side of my child ; and in my unbelief, and in the wisdom of my own conceit—for the words my husband had uttered as to my child's safety were to me as the idle wind—I prayed to God. So great was my eagerness for the gift that He had already given, that it seemed to me the whole world was as nothing in the balance.

'Spare my child,' I said. 'Save my child. Even though my husband's very love should be taken from me in return for its life. I can bear all but seeing her lie dead before me.'

And the all-mighty and all-loving Father, in His might, and His wisdom, and His great love, accepted from my selfish heart its offered and needless sacrifice, and took me at my wicked word. For even as I spoke, though I knew it not, my husband's love passed from me, and my already rescued child awoke from sleep.

'Mamma! mamma!'

And he who loved me no longer entered, and saw my tears falling on the baby face.

'Charles!' I said, 'thank God with me. I cannot bear the joy. She knows me!—she will live!'

'It cannot be any news to you,' he said, quietly. 'You were told that it would be so. Here is your draught; drink it at once.'

I felt chilled by his cold manner, but put out my hand to receive the glass. As I did so I raised my eyes to his face, and with a quick cry started back.

'What is the matter?'

'What do you mean?' he asked.

His voice was so calm and quiet that I thought for the moment there must be something wrong with my sight.

'I thought——'

'What did you think?'

'I thought—and I thought rightly,' I said, recovering my senses—'I thought you looked white and ill.'

'You are nervous, Mary. I am not ill.

Your medicine will do you no good, if you defer taking it. Let me beg you to do so at once.'

I obeyed, looking earnestly at him as I took it from his hand. I was right. His face was deadly white, even to the lips. I could not, with my utmost effort, fathom the expression it wore. It was not horror, it was not astonishment, it was not anger, it was not pain; it seemed a mixture of all these feelings blended into one. I put the glass down. 'I have done as you wished,' I said; 'now tell me why you are angry?'

'Angry!' he said, with a curious laugh, which increased my uneasiness. 'Why should I be angry? Have you ever known me to be angry without a cause?'

'No,' I said, 'I do not mean that; but perhaps I have unknowingly done wrong. I would not hurt you willingly for all the world.'

'Of course not,' he said, looking straight before him, as though he did not realise or

care to realise the meaning of my words. 'Of course not; why should you willingly hurt me? You would not hurt me willingly for all the world.'

'I would not,' I said; 'but—but have I hurt you unwillingly?'

'You have done nothing,' he said, looking down upon me suddenly. 'You have done nothing that you can undo. Your—your duty now is to lie down and rest, that when the time comes for your doing so, you may tend your child.'

'Can I do nothing for *you?*'

'Yes,' he said, sternly, 'you can obey me, and—and cease questioning.'

'Are you not glad?' I said, almost petulantly, 'that baby is safe?'

He made no answer, but, turning abruptly away, without even glancing at the child or myself, hastily left the room.

CHAPTER XLIII.

When I went downstairs an hour or two later I found that my husband had left the house. Strange as it may seem, my mind was so occupied with the thought of my child, so happily restored to me, my heart so filled with joy in the place of its late anxious fear, that though many hours passed and he did not return I felt no uneasiness, nor did I even speculate as to his reason for absenting himself. Stranger still, I utterly forgot, almost immediately after its occurrence, his singular behaviour towards me. I can only conclude now that there was no room in my heart, at the time, for any other feeling but delight at my little one's recovery. I was dazed; unable to grasp, however vaguely, any fact that had no immediate connection

with my one idea. Later on, when that which I am about to narrate was a thing of the past, I recollected the strange conduct of my husband, and also called to mind that, the two nights following close upon my child's restoration, he was absent from home so late that I retired to rest on my temporary couch by her side before his return, thus no 'Good-night' passed between us, and that on their corresponding mornings he gave me no greeting when I first met him. When these days were passed, every hour of which, I know now, was tinged with the same pre-occupation on my part, and a strange, inexplicable indifference to me and all around, on the part of my husband—then the blow came.

It was a fair, bright morning. I had washed and dressed my little child with my own hands—it seemed to me now that it would be desecration to allow anyone but myself to attend to her wants—and I sat by the nursery window, singing softly, engaged

in some pleasant work, which I hoped, later on, would adorn my little one's dress. How happy I felt! 'I have no care now,' I said. 'If my baby only continues to improve, as doubtless she will, I have no care in the world. When Charles comes in from his walk, I will ask him when he thinks we can all go for a drive. It will be so pleasant to know she is well enough to leave the house.' The door of the room opened as this thought crossed my mind.

'I do not want you now, Nurse,' I said, gaily, without looking round. 'I will take care of baby for the rest of the morning.'

There was no answer, and I glanced up from my work.

'Why, what brings you back so early? I thought you were safe till twelve o'clock at least.'

Now, as I looked at him, a sudden fear grew in my heart, of what I knew not. It seemed that my eyes became powerless, unable to move their gaze from his face.

What was in that face that I felt my own blanch as I watched it? I could not tell. It simply wore a white, still, settled look, as of a man who has made a great determination, and will abide by it at all hazards. He had his hat on. As I looked at him he took it off hastily, as though he had forgotten to do so before, placed it on a table, and threw his gloves into it.

'Why have you come home so soon?' I said. 'Are you ill?'

'I have returned because I have something to say to you?' he answered. 'You had better come with me into your room.'

The vague terror I felt grew stronger. 'Why cannot you speak here?' I said. 'There is nothing to prevent your speaking before your own child. There is no one else to hear, and she cannot understand you.'

'God forbid that she should understand,' he answered. 'And, for the rest, *I* forbid that she should hear.'

'Then you must delay your speech. I

cannot leave her now.' He looked at me a moment, and then rang the bell.

'Nurse, take charge of the child a few minutes. Your mistress will not be absent long. Now, Mary, I am ready.'

Utterly bewildered, I followed him in silence. When we came to my little private room he opened the door, and motioned me to enter. I did so. He kept close by me and, when we were fairly inside, closed the door, locked it, and put the key in his pocket.

'You had better be seated, Madam,' he said. 'You may possibly feel fatigued before I have ended all I have to say.'

I obeyed again, crossing the room, and taking a chair.

'Are you going to kill me?' I said.

'Certainly not,' he answered, with a laugh more terrible to me than the fiercest anger would have been. 'You are surely not afraid of me!'

'No, I am not afraid,' I answered, proudly. 'Why should I fear?'

'Why, indeed? I know that you are not fearful. Women of your class never are. If they were so, how could they live? How could they plot, and devise, and lay their devil's snares for unwary feet? No! They are never fearful. If they were their lives would be one long terror.'

As he spoke he came towards me, and, moving a chair which stood near me to the opposite side of the table at which I had placed myself, threw himself back in it, crossed one knee over the other, and watched me steadily, with an amused smile on his face, tapping his foot on the floor.

'Yes,' he said, in a slow, measured tone. 'You are a pretty, I might say, even, a beautiful woman. Your eyes and hair are bright, and you have, alas! that meek, subtle look that has more power over most men than the boldest and most splendid beauty. If you go on improving for the next ten years, as in all probability you will—if you keep the satin smoothness of your skin, the

sweet subtle smile you possess in such perfection ; the meek, dove-like expression that blots out the damned falseness of your eyes —who knows what you may become ? Who knows to what heights you may attain ? You may even rise, with the help of the riches you have secured from the man whose name you bear, to be the Queen of your class—the Ruler of Fashion ! Fair, innocent girls, who know not even the existence of such abortions as yourself and your sister-serpents, may imitate your style of dress, your sweet, meek looks, your proud assumption of humility, and even by their mere shadow, may win for ever the hearts of tender men, whose greatest blessing will be, that they have never, to their utter undoing, crossed the path of the originator of the false arts that have beguiled them. Who knows what time may bring you to ? Like Catharine of Russia, you may become, as Byron says, not certainly "the greatest of sovereigns," but "the greatest of——"'

'What have I done?' I said, gently, 'that you should speak to me like this?'

'How fair and sweet you are! I could look at you for ever. I could listen to you for ever! If I were to stay long and hear you speak I should believe, as others might, that you are the chastest of your sex, that you are purer than the unsullied snow!'

'Alas!' I said, faintly, 'I know not what you mean.'

'When I was a boy,' he said, 'when I was a young, strong man, I kept clear of you all. It was reserved for my later years to be entrapped. When my father bade me shun this evil, my love for him taught me obedience to his commands. When the hotness of my youth was past, and I prayed God to give to my arms a true and tender wife, He first showed me your worthy friend as a possible helpmeet, and then presented me with yourself as a specimen of perfect womanhood! There is a certain grotesque humour in it all which even you

must perceive, and which, indeed, is to me inexpressibly amusing.'

He laughed again, such an easy, natural laugh, that the awful meaning of his words seemed lost upon me; and yet I watched him with a vague idea that his mood might change at any moment, and that my soul might be hurried into eternity before I had even realised that my life was in danger. But still the ease of his manner belied my undefined fear. He lay stretched back in his chair, in the most careless attitude imaginable. One hand in his pocket, the other playing idly with the seals of his watch, still steadily looking at me, with the same amused smile on his face.

'Yes,' he said, 'two such women as you and your friend, two such peerless, fallen—angels, we will say—are seldom found hunting in couples. Why could not Graeme have contented *you*? Doubtless, at one time, had you pleased, you might have married him. There is a tide in all these affairs, you know,

which taken at the flood will invariably lead to marriage. He had a certain beauty—a boyish, happy look, which to some women is irresistible. And he had money too, or said he had. But why do I speculate? *Possibly* —we will only say *possibly*—it is unwise to be certain of anything in this world—possibly you knew as much of his affairs as he did himself, which—if it be so—explains everything. After all, your friend was less vile than yourself—if, indeed, as I believe now, there can be shades of vileness in your sisterhood. At one time I doubted it, or at least concluded that in such a giant wave of pollution the inflections of light and shade are, at all events, indiscernible. Now I begin to see they can not only be discernible, but broad. She preferred her lust—or love does she call it? ha, ha!—her love, to this world's dross. Now, there is a sort of filthy virtue even in that; while you—well, in any case you made a better bargain—you gained the dross and myself. Myself! Certainly, you

did well. For putting aside the potent charm that made him as nothing in the balance, I have advantages which even Graeme must allow to be such, advantages which must count for much in the eyes of such as you. I can say without vanity that I am handsome: my features are well cut and defined; I am tall and broadly built, and, more than all, in the pride of my strength and manhood. Why, many of you would prefer me even to Graeme, as far as my *physique* goes. I am not so shifty, either, as he unfortunately seems to be, and my nature is hot and passionate, and, I believe, not ungenerous; all points in my favour, all points favourable to the kindling in such as you of the spurious beastly passion you miscall by the holiest of names! Yes, you have done well for yourself. You have been wiser than your friend. But of the two she is, I think, immeasurably the least vile—im-mea-su-ra-bly so.'

He waited, as though expecting me to speak, but I was speechless. I could only

sit immovable, too horror-stricken to find words.

'Well,' he went on, 'you have gratified your desires as far as I am concerned. You have possessed me and my means, which latter are still yours. It was to tell you this that I wished to speak with you now for the last time—not to waste precious moments in idle words, as I have been doing. All my worldly wealth is at your feet. Take it, and use it as you will. You have won the stakes, and I—I have simply lost. My solicitor has orders to see paid into your hands the whole of my income, except a small residue which I have reserved to meet the needs of my position. But—for myself—you will never see me more! All is yours. And with regard to the personal loss which you are—supposed—to suffer from my desertion—you had better—well, you had better have Graeme here. Doubtless he could manage your affairs for you. When he knows you are rich he will return to his allegiance at

the beck of your finger. I do not fear his wasting your substance as he has done that of others, for I know you are too wise to give him the power to do so. In fact, I know of no obstacle to prevent your doing as you please in every way. Nothing can be easier than the way of the harlot when she has money at her back.'

He drew himself up as he ended speaking, the smile died out of his face, and he pressed his lips heavily together. Then he rose slowly from his chair, shook himself together, as I had often seen him do when overtaken by sleep after a long walk, and, still playing with his watch-chain, came a step or two nearer to me. Then, stopping abruptly, he looked down upon me with a half-disdainful, half-insolent expression, such as a man's face might assume at times when looking upon a woman whom he holds lightly in his esteem—such a woman as I was not. For the first time a feeling of anger came over me. All fear died in my

heart as this new look met my eyes. I did not rise, but, retaining my seat, pushed my chair with one hand farther from him, and gazed at him steadily and defiantly.

'You are a beautiful woman,' he said, his face flushing a vivid red. 'As I look at you, in each fresh, new mood—and I have never seen you in your present one before—I see what I have lost in the past by only knowing you in fair weather. I could defy the world to clasp you to my heart in one passionate, last embrace before we part for ever, and, as you look at me—though I despise and wonder at my own miserable weakness—I know, too surely, that I cannot forego it. Alas! that heaven should give to such as you the power to make men so utterly lose themselves, while fair, pure women, to whom it is a shame even to touch your garments, are fain to suffer neglect, and spend their lonely hours in prayers for our salvation! And yet—God help me—while

I look at you I must love you, though,' he added, coming towards me with a half-sigh, but with a passionate, fierce light in his eyes, 'it can never more be as the pure, spotless wife that I press you to my breast, but as the shameless wanton that you are!'

As the last words left his lips I started to my feet, in a wild, reckless tempest of anger that almost took away my senses. Every nerve in my body thrilled with rage and indignation.

'Do you know what you have said?' I exclaimed. 'Do you know to whom you speak? Do you know that I am your wife, and the mother of your child?'

He drew back as I spoke. 'I know,' he said, slowly, 'that you are—as I have said—and also,' he laughed, 'the mother of—of—what you are pleased to call my child. That is the extent of my knowledge. Or rather, I find the first fact quite sufficient for my present consideration.'

He again came nearer to me, but this time I would not give way an inch.

'If you touch me,' I said; 'if you so much as let me feel your breath upon my lips, I will kill you. God will surely give me strength to strike you dead!'

'As you will,' he said, coldly, shrugging his shoulders, and moving back. 'I see that you have done with me. It is rather sudden, is it not, considering—considering—everything? Well, so be it. I can, after all, buy such kisses as yours by the thousand, for one thousandth part of what I have bestowed on you to-day. But—as you will. Farewell, Madam; farewell.'

Without another word he turned from me, unlocked the door, and left the room, shutting me in. Hardly realising that he was indeed gone, I stood irresolute, trying to understand what had passed, wondering what it would mean when I did understand it. Suddenly, I heard the hall-door shut.

With a quick presentiment of further evil, I gained the window, in time to see my husband walking quietly down the road, with his hat drawn over his eyes, a white, still face, and a half-smile on his lips.

CHAPTER XLIV.

SEVERAL months had passed away, and I had not seen his face again. At first, the blow I had received had seemed to deaden all my senses. Many days went by before I could realise the full meaning of my husband's words. Then, when I had done so, the cause for them remained for many weeks a mystery to me, which the utmost exertion of my intellect could not fathom. As is often the case in such utter darkness, the light came suddenly, and so broadly that at first it blinded me. It was as though an inner voice spoke to me—

'When did your husband first change to you?'

'The day my child was restored to me.'

'When he entered the room again, after performing your errand?'

'Yes.'

'Why should he change to you at that particular moment?'

'Because,' I answered, almost involuntarily, 'because he went to my desk—and—and—' Merciful heaven! I knew all now. He had seen and read——

With an awful conviction upon me, I hurried to my desk and opened it. There it lay, crushed by his passionate hand, and thrown loosely on the top of my other papers. The letter that some evil spirit had tempted me not to destroy, but to keep, alas! too surely to my own undoing.

'You will please to discontinue these way-side meetings, and, in fact, all private communication, with the man with whom I saw you this afternoon. I do not suspect anything as yet; but I know what women are. Give me the slightest ground for suspicion, *and leave the rest to me.* You had

better never have lived than that I should for one moment doubt your truth to me.'

. . . . .

When I recovered my senses, I determined at all hazards to find my husband. I knew that the oath I had taken to the writer of the horrible words which had wrought my misery would ever prevent my giving to any one a full explanation of those words; and yet I said to myself, 'Something will surely happen to reconcile us if we only meet again. God will teach me how to satisfy him if we only see each other face to face.'

The first step I decided to take towards effecting my purpose was to tell the whole truth to my dear old friend, Dr. Long. I had, at the outset of my trouble, put off his enquiries, as I had those of my fair-weather friends, by stating that my husband had been called away on business, and the date of his return was most uncertain. We had so few acquaintances, that his prolonged absence had caused me no inconvenience as far as

the curiosity of outsiders was concerned. But from the first moment I had proffered my information to Dr. Long, I knew intuitively that he did not believe me. The very anxiety he displayed to prove to me that he credited my assertion strengthened my conviction that he felt certain I was, for some reason or other, speaking falsely. After the first statement on my part, he had never once enquired again as to my husband's movements. He had contented himself during his occasional visits with asking me if he was quite well when I heard from him last; to which I had replied quietly in the affirmative, and the subject had dropped. Now I felt that if I wished to succeed in my object I must tell him everything; and yet how to do so I knew not. But good fortune followed me.

The very day after my unhappy discovery it so happened that my old friend called in, as he frequently did, to enquire after the health of my baby and myself. And, without a word of warning, hardly knowing what I was

about to do, as soon as the door was fairly closed, and he had quietly seated himself, I threw myself on my knees at his feet, and hiding my face with my hands, besought him to help me.

I sometimes smile now when I recall the utter bewilderment and comic misery of his expression, as he drew my hands from my head and looked at me.

'My dear young lady,' he said, trying to raise me from the ground where I had now thrown myself in my bitter agony—'My dear, dear young friend, what can I do for you? I would lay down my life for you or your good husband. Tell me all the truth. Tell me where he is, and as God is in heaven I will bring him back to you.'

'Alas!' I said, 'I cannot tell you where he is. I know not. He has deserted me. He is gone from me. Oh! my dearest friend—*his* dearest friend—you must find him, and bring him back to me, or I shall die!'

'You—do—not—know—where—he—is!' he said, in a bewildered tone.

'No! I know nothing. He has left me.'

'But why?'

'I cannot tell. He says I am——'

'What?'

'I—I cannot say.'

'Hoity-toity—you are both mad! Stand upon your feet, my dear—stand upon your feet. It's the safest and most natural position. Tell your old friend all the truth. It will go hard if he cannot help you. Stand upon your feet—that's the first prescription I give you.' He endeavoured again to raise me, successfully this time, for I helped myself.

'It is a very good prescription too,' I said, trying to smile as I looked at him.

'Now, don't begin to laugh yet,' he said, leading me to a seat. 'It's unnatural, and if persisted in will end in hysteria. Just quietly hold my hand as you are doing now; and

tell me, as you would have told your own father, the whole affair from beginning to end.'

'I am so weak,' I said, trying to excuse myself, 'and so very unhappy, or I should not have behaved so childishly and alarmed you.'

'You did not alarm me, my dear. Not at all!—not at all! Now go on. The sooner I know your trouble, the sooner will half of it be removed.'

Then in such words as would come to me, still holding his hand, I told him my unhappy story; and as I told it, I saw growing on his face the gravest look I have ever, either before or since, seen his kind features wear.

'My child,' he said gently, when my tale was ended, 'will you show to me the letter of which you speak?'

I fetched it, and put it in his hand. As he read it, to my astonishment his face grew lighter.

'Why,' he said, 'these words are capable of fifty interpretations. Fifty at the least. Is it possible that Charles Harrop, the son of such a father—is it possible that any one of my old friend's sons can be such a d—— ahem! such a simpleton? Do you really mean, my dear, that he never condescended to ask you for an explanation of—of—this effusion?'

'He never even told me that he had found it. I could not understand in the least at first why he was angry. But I can think of nothing else in the world that could have caused him to treat me as he has done.'

'Why,' he said, looking at it more closely, 'there is not even a name signed.'

'No, but he knows the writing. Mr. Graeme'—I felt my face flush as I pronounced his name—'Mr. Graeme, I think, tried to disguise it; but my husband doubtless recognised it, and the attempted disguise does not, of course, make matters any better.'

'The envelope bears no address either.

Was it in a directed one when he found it?'

'No; it was not in an envelope at all. I placed it in that. I burnt the original one years ago?'

'Why did you not have the sense to burn its contents too? What in the world could you be thinking of to preserve such a production?'

'I don't know why I did it.'

'I suppose not,' he said gravely. 'But why, in the face of all this, should your husband at once conclude that the letter must necessarily have been sent to *you*?'

'Doubtless because he found it in my desk.'

'Logical, I must say. Now,' he said, slowly, 'if I had been in his shoes I should at once have concluded that it had come by accident into your possession; and that the person to whom it was written was, in all probability, your most unhappy friend, Miss Launceston.'

'Miss Launceston!' I exclaimed, the name sounding so strange in my ears that I could hardly pronounce it. 'Oh, Dr. Long! What *can* you mean? Why should Mr. Graeme write to *her*?'

'Does not your sense tell you that he probably *did* write to her. That he most likely wrote to her, not only once, but many times, before she ruined her life so utterly for his sake?'

A faint, death-like feeling came over me. The full signification of my husband's words respecting her was coming to me now for the first time. 'Oh, Dr. Long! tell me. I do not understand. Where is she?'

'Why,' he said, slowly, 'she is still with Graeme, I suppose. Surely so, unless——. But, my dear young lady, why should it affect you like this? Good heavens! It is not possible that you were ignorant——'

'I know nothing. I never dreamed of this. I was never told where she went.'

He looked at me as though he could not believe his ears.

'I will say nothing more,' he said. 'I have been most unwise already. The one thing for me to do now is to help you to find your husband, and, with God's aid, we will soon accomplish our purpose. Why, I have known him all his life,' he went on, in a more cheerful tone. 'Yes, all his life, I may truly say, without exaggeration; and he's not going to give me the slip now that more than half the natural term of his years is expired. I can't think what's come over him of late. As a lad, and even as a man, his easy, trusting nature was a bye-word among his friends. His father used to say of him that if he found a man out in a lie one moment he'd believe him again implicitly the next, as though he could not actually realise the existence of evil an instant longer than it was actually presented to his gaze. He was an utter contrast to his twin-brother, whose creed appeared to be that every man

and woman is dishonest and unworthy of confidence. *He* believed in no one but "his dear Charlie." He was wont to say, "he had no doubt his brother had been created solely for the purpose of teaching him that human nature could be true." But alas! poor lad, he is sadly changed. It is as though his brother's mantle had fallen on him when he died.'

'You must bear in mind,' I pleaded, 'the fearful experience he has had, the awful ending to the greatest faith of his life. Surely there are few whose moral nature could rebound from such a blow—fewer still who could so early learn to trust again! Surely we must know——'

'You are—as your husband said—' he interrupted; 'you find excuses for all who err. Truly, my dear, there is nothing so pitiful as a woman. She is the only creature who will kiss the hand that smites her unlawfully. Well, we'll bring this miracle of perfection home again! And you shall beg his pardon

for—for—anything of which you may be pleased to accuse yourself. And we'll make *him* forgive *you*, and you'll both be happy ever after. I've not lived in the world for seventy years without gaining a pretty accurate knowledge of your sex, and if your present business doesn't end in some such way as that, well, I'm a greater simpleton than I take myself for—that's all.'

'But how will you find him, Dr. Long?'

'That's *my* business, madam. I simply promise that I'll bring him to you—that is, if he's alive.'

'You do not think he'd—he'd—kill himself?' I stammered.

'Merciful goodness! no. Whatever put that into your head? Why in the world should he do such a thing? Now, if he'd happened to take the affair, *at the outset*, in what I should call a suicidal light, he might certainly have shot himself off-hand. But, my dear, my invariable experience in cases of this kind is, that when a man hesitates he

is safe. Should his suspicions prove well-founded, he becomes in time indifferent to the past, and consoles himself with—something or other; and, if the contrary, he comes home on his knees, and, as I said before, indulgently permits his wife to beg his pardon, as an expiation of the sins which *he* has committed, and they live in renewed and more firmly cemented love for the rest of their days. Now, if you could only make up your mind to wait patiently, one of these fine evenings when you walked into the dining-room, you would find your husband ringing for his supper in the most matter-of-fact state of mind imaginable. But, if you can't wait, why, I must go and fetch him. The first is the most dignified course, you know.'

'Oh, Dr. Long! I don't care about dignity. All I want is my dear husband back again. If I had only been patient with him! If I had only asked him gently for an explanation of his words, he would have

given it! he is so just—and all this misery might have been spared to us. He is so generous too,' I went on, rather irrelevantly. 'He has given me *all* his money, you know. He has only kept a very little for himself. Didn't I tell you?'

'All the more reason, my dear, that he'll come back of his own accord. *That* sort of tragic excitement never lasts long. A man who has bestowed the greater part of his fortune in hot blood upon a woman whom he affects to despise, is safe to come back to her pretty soon in cold blood to see how she is spending it. Charles Harrop is no hero, I assure you. He'll soon get tired of even comparatively empty pockets, if he's got them, which, after all, is very unlikely. You mustn't picture him, you know, going about in rags, eating a dry crust. It's not in him. If he told you, as I understood you to state, that he had reserved sufficient to—to—"meet the needs of his position"—ahem! he is probably at the present moment in Paris, or

some other refuge of the destitute, eating his cold chicken lunch, sipping his burgundy, and deciding that, to drown his despair, after a good dinner of course (possibly with one or two choice acquaintances), he'll go to the "Opera Comique" in the evening.'

'I do not believe it for a moment,' I exclaimed, indignantly. 'You do not understand him, Dr. Long. He loves me dearly! He could not do such things away from me. Eat chickens! And go to the theatre! Oh dear! oh dear! Oh! oh! oh!'

'Well, my child, I'm sorry to have hurt your feelings, but I must hold on. I really do think that in all probability he *is* at this moment eating his lunch; and with regard to loving you very dearly just at present, I really don't think he does. It's better to take a healthy view of things, you know.'

'Oh, poor Charles! You *don't* understand him. No one can do so but myself.'

'Very well, my dear. It shall be as you say. We'll agree that I *don't* understand

him. I ought to, though, if I don't; I ought to understand most things by this time. But we'll agree that I'm altogether wrong in my judgment of your husband, and as you appear to think it the best plan, I'll begin to make tracks after him at once. I'll set off, without delay, and try "Carbury and Newman's" first.'

'You'll get nothing out of them. They won't tell you where he is even if they know.'

'They *know*, my dear, doubtless. Or rather they know where a letter will reach him. Equally certain it is that they'll not spread their knowledge intentionally. Nevertheless I'm going to them in the first instance, and I'll bring your husband home to you before the week's out.'

'Oh, Dr. Long, how can I thank you?'

'Why, by keeping yourself quiet, waiting patiently, and trying to get some flesh on your bones before I get back again. Now, my dear,' putting out his hand to me, 'bid

me God-speed. Nothing can be done,' he added reverently, 'without the blessing of Heaven. Surely it will be with me in my quest.'

'May God bless and help you, my dear friend. A thousand thanks for all your goodness to me. My heart is lighter than it has been, oh, for so many days.'

'You should always look a thing straight in the face, you know,' he said heartily. 'The ugliest troubles lessen when you do it, and, in more cases than you would imagine, shrink into nothingness.'

Then, with a kind 'farewell,' my good friend left me. In an hour's time I found myself busily planning the future which would be mine when my husband had returned to me.

CHAPTER XLV.

SEVERAL weeks passed away and I was still alone, waiting and expectant. Frequent letters arrived from my friend, each bringing tidings of some sort. He had traced my husband from one place to another, always on the track, but never coming up with him, and in every epistle was an assurance that the next would bring me more definite news. Though, when the first fortnight had passed away my heart partly failed me for a time, yet I never utterly lost hope. I soon recovered from my temporary depression, and I can safely say that never once during those long weeks did I doubt that Dr. Long's efforts would be eventually crowned with success; that though his promise to restore my husband to me *speedily* had failed to be

fulfilled, yet in time he would discover him, and induce him to return to me.

The summer was gone now, and the cold short autumn evenings made a dreary ending to my lonely days. Though the change to hope from the terrible despair which had preceded it had been to me like the sudden cessation of some horrible pain, yet even now I suffered; not, as I said before, from the fear that my husband might not eventually return to me, but from the sickness of heart which deferred hope always brings. Each morning when I rose I buoyed myself up with the thought that before the day closed in I might possibly see his face again; and I would put off retiring to rest at night till I could no longer prevent myself sleeping, for it seemed to me that there was still hope of his return until I had accepted as a fact that, even for me, another day was indeed over. Most of my time was spent in the society of my child. She was the gayest and most contented little creature I have ever

known, and by her gentle ways and caresses would occasionally charm my grief away, and make me forget for the moment the existence of any other being but our two selves. Sometimes she would amuse both me and her nurse for long hours together with her babyish tricks, and affectation of the manners of her elders. These pleasant interludes gave me renewed strength to bear my sorrow. I also endeavoured by reading, and busying myself about house affairs, to divert my thoughts, and occasionally succeeded in doing so. And yet I can truly say that the memory of my husband seldom really left my mind. Even my sleep was haunted by dreams of meeting him. I would see him in all descriptions of places, in all sorts of moods, in all kinds of disguises ; and I would wake from my troubled slumbers unrefreshed, to begin the weary waiting of another day.

As time went on, as the long weeks grew into months, my feelings, as it were, intensified. From pondering mainly on one sub-

ject, I grew by degrees to think that no other was worthy of consideration, and I gave up gradually every effort to distract my thoughts and keep myself in a healthy frame of mind. I became at length so imbued with the idea that the return of my husband was the only event which should be, by right, of any possible interest to me, that I began to fancy it almost a sin to think of anything else. In plain language, I became simply a monomaniac. Even when Dr. Long's letters became less frequent, and very, very gradually, in their expression, less hopeful of any immediate success in his object, I still dwelt upon nothing but my one idea: I still would not resume the habit I had resigned of trying to interest myself in the slight events of every-day life. I became merely reconciled to delay. I simply counted off each day in my thoughts as another way-mark passed; I only quietly told myself, as each night closed in, that I was another twenty-four hours nearer to my husband. I believe that, had

this unhappy period of my life lasted till the present day, I should still have felt no impatience. The outer world—its events, its hopes, its desires—would still have been as nothing to me. I should still have merely waited silently, uttering no complaint, feeling no pain of restless desire to reach the goal, dreaming of nothing but that one speck of light in the distance when my husband should again be at my side. And all the time, though I knew it not, there was preparing for me in the immediate future a shock so great—an awaking from my listless apathy so terrible—that when it came upon me it struck out as with a blow even—for a time—the very memory of my late monomania.

It was the beginning of November, and three weeks had elapsed since the receipt of my last letter from Dr. Long. I felt no uneasiness. I was in the habit now of waiting as patiently for his communications as I waited for the time when there would be

no longer any necessity for them. I had just, however, so far roused myself as to begin to wonder vaguely at my friend's silence, when it was broken by the following epistle :—

'Genoa, Nov. 7, 18—.

'My dear Friend,

You will regret to hear that I fear my next discovery will be that your husband is in America, I have traced him here, where I am informed he was heard, on more than one occasion, to express an intention of visiting New York, and other cities in that vicinity. It may not be as I fear, but it is best to prepare you for the worst, which at present appears to be that you may probably not have to kill the fatted calf till the spring comes. I am glad to see from the tone of your letters that you seem resigned to circumstances. They might be worse, you know. With regard to myself, if my mission were not such a painful one, this would be the happiest time I have had for many

years. I needed an incentive to get me out of my shell, and now I have taken my liberty, I am thoroughly enjoying it. You shall hear again from me very shortly—I hope and trust to tell you that my forebodings are only the croakings of an old simpleton. Time presses, so adieu. With every good wish for my god-child and yourself.

JOHN LONG.

'P.S.—Will you write to me at once?—Poste Restante, Genoa. I am most anxious to hear if your health is improved, and all news. It is so long since I have had a line from you. Unless you take the present moment by the forelock, it may be weeks before a letter will reach me—I mean, of course, in the event of my having to take a sea-trip.

J. L.'

I read this letter through calmly, and decided at once, in my usual apathetic manner, that I would answer it immediately, as the

writer desired me to do so. I felt no excitement at the news I had heard—'I shall probably not see Charles as soon as I thought,' was the only inward comment I made. But I wrote at full length, and at once, in reply to Dr. Long's epistle, urging my friend to spare no expense in the prosecution of his search, and to let me hear from him again at the earliest possible date. When my task was completed, I was about to consign the letter to a servant to be posted, when a sudden desire seized me to know when the next mail left, and when Dr. Long would be likely to receive it. Not caring to trust a careless girl to make these enquiries, I hastily decided to go to the post-office myself. It was a damp dull miserable evening, and I had not been out of doors for several weeks. But I did not hesitate. Hurriedly ascending to my room, I dressed myself for walking, and was about to start on my errand, when an injunction of Dr. Long's came to my mind. He had informed me that, on account of the

state of my health, it was expedient for me to keep in the house when the weather was inclined to be damp, and in fact had extracted from me, not long before starting on his journey, a promise to do so. When I recollected this, I at once abandoned my intention of going out, and was about to ring the bell and resign my task to the most trustworthy person I could select, when a strange inexplicable feeling came over me—a feeling as though some unseen agent was urging me to perform my errand myself, telling me that I should be neglecting some great duty if I did not. I had so many times in the course of my life experienced peculiar presentiments—if I may so call them—of this kind, such powerful promptings to take some course opposed to my wishes and inclinations, that they had ceased to alarm me by their strangeness and singularity. In this instance, as I had done in all others, I obeyed my unseen monitor, and descending the stairs without further consideration,

opened the hall-door myself, and went out into the night. I shivered as I did so, whether with cold or from the effect of the unwonted feelings that oppressed me, I know not. In any case I struggled so successfully against my disagreeable sensations, that I soon found myself almost enjoying the fresh air, damp and unhealthy as it was. The distance from my home to the nearest post-office was about three-quarters of a mile, and my most direct way to it was straight down the high road. As I walked along this wide thoroughfare, the pleasant, brightly-lighted shops, the busy faces of the buyers and sellers they contained, the wayfarers of every kind hurrying along the broad street, all apparently full of some interest or another in the cares and concerns of every-day life, roused in me, in spite of myself, a feeling of cheerfulness to which I had long been a stranger. Before I had been out of doors five minutes, the miserable monomaniac of the past few weeks existed no longer. I

began absolutely to enjoy my walk, and arrived at the post-office quite light-hearted.

After making the necessary enquiries, I slipped my letter into the box, and started on my road home, still watching the faces of my fellow-travellers with a new interest, and forgetting for the time my past unhappiness—little thinking it was never to come back to me in its full intensity any more.

When I was at the height of my newly-born pleasure, I came to the corner of a street where it became necessary to wait, to cross. Impatient at the delay—for all my natural feelings seemed returning to me—I stood still, trying to mark out a safe way through the vehicles which for the moment thronged the road-way, when I heard a great noise near me—a confusion of many voices. Just then the crossing became clear, and, looking beyond it, I discovered instantly the cause of the commotion. A number of people—a large crowd of people—were coming in the opposite direction to myself. I

saw at once that if I stayed where I was, or went on my way, I must inevitably get mixed up with the group; so with a quick decision I retraced my steps for a few yards, and, escaping just in time, took refuge in a shop. Opposite to this shop there was a lamp; and, in my position at the door, as the crowd went by, I saw each face and figure in it distinctly.

'Keep away, can't you? Don't torment a poor creature like that.'

'She's been drinking—she can't walk straight.'

'She's not; she's a lady! Can't you see it? She's faint, poor thing; she's faint with hunger.'

Then came a few of the yells with which boys, especially boys in crowds, delight to cheer the streets towards evening.

'Can't you clear off, some of you, and let her go her way in peace? She's going to the workhouse.'

It was a woman—a tall, slight, young

woman; and in her arms she held a baby, wrapped in the folds of her shawl. Her dress was dusty and travel-stained, but not of poor material. Her head was bent down, and turned away from me, so that I could not see her face; but in the figure there was a wild negligent grace that sent a thrill of horror through me, why I knew not. I was fascinated. I could not move my gaze from her for a moment.

When she arrived at the lamp, she stopped beneath it, put her shawl partly aside, and fixed her eyes quietly on the child in her arms. Her face stood out clearly in the broad, bright light. Almost before I looked at it I gave a great cry of horror and dismay. Had her beauty been ten times more dimmed and faded than it was—had the past, whatever it had been, changed her even more fearfully than it had changed her —I should have known her! I should have known her through everything. I should have known her had her face been cold and

disfigured in death. I should have known her anywhere—it was Marion Launceston.

As the cry left my lips the people near turned round and stared at me; but she never raised her eyes. I was insensible to everything but the thought that she was near. I darted forwards, and in a moment was close to her, holding her by the arm.

'Marion!' I said; 'Oh, Marion! Don't you know me?'

She looked up now; she recognised me instantly. She covered the baby's face quickly, and leaned against the lamp-post for support. The portion of the crowd nearest us watched in silence.

'I know her,' I said, glancing round. 'Will some one get me a cab? I'll take her home with me.'

'She doesn't look fit company for the likes of a pretty lady like you, mum,' said a rough-looking young man in a fur cap, who, by the help of a bull-dog at the end of a string, had just succeeded in forcing his way

to the front. 'She's not fit for the likes of you, mum; but howsumever—here, cab!'

It came up immediately. I gave the man some money, and my address for the cabman, and in a few moments we were driving rapidly onwards.

She kept her eyes cast down. Seated opposite, I watched her. She did not raise them once. On her face was an expression of quiet hopelessness that made me forget all else but her presence. I knew nothing but that she was near me; I knew nothing but that it was the dear friend of my girlhood changed with an awful change. I could not speak. I only looked at her as she sat immovable and calm before me. The cab stopped, and we both alighted. I signed to her to go up the steps of the house; but she stood still at the gate, till I had dismissed the cabman and joined her.

'I cannot go in,' she whispered.

'Why not? Why should you refuse to do so?'

'I cannot enter,' she said, in the same low tone, 'if—if—if it is his home. Let us go somewhere else together. I want to speak with you.'

'He is not here,' I said, sighing, and taking her hand. 'There is no chance of your seeing him. He is miles and miles away. I will not let you go, Marion,' I exclaimed passionately, as she seemed about to move from me; 'you *must* come in and—and —rest—and tell me what you have to say.'

She obeyed now, and we entered the house together. She followed me through the hall, into the drawing-room. I closed the door, hardly remembering the wondering eyes which had been fixed on my visitor as she entered.

There was a bright fire burning. She went near it almost mechanically, and gazed earnestly into it. With the warm light upon her face, the old wild beauty came back, and the dead lustre of the wonderful eyes beamed in them once more.

'Sit down,' I said, placing a chair near her. 'Sit down and rest yourself, Marion. The—the—little baby must be cold.' As I assisted her to a seat, I moved the shawl from the child's face. It was white and still.

'Take it,' she said quietly, putting her burden towards me. 'You are right, Mary. It is very cold. Take it—and hide it from me. It will never be warm again.'

It was a dull heavy weight in my arms. Trembling with a dreadful terror, I stooped down before the fire and looked at it fearfully. It was enough. I saw at one glance what had happened. I saw that no light nor heat could ever again bring life to the child-face. It was dead.

But it was not this alone that I saw. I saw something, at the sight of which the bitterness of holding it dead in my arms faded into nothingness—was forgotten in a moment—I saw something which froze the blood in my veins, and made my heart stand

still with a vague dread and horror! I saw in the quiet, still features a strange likeness to myself—a strong likeness to my own child—to my father as he lay dead—and, more vivid than all—to my brother who had been drowned at sea—and yet a terrible awful resemblance to the cruel, wicked face of the man who had wrought us all such fearful misery.

I knew everything now—everything. But dim and undefined, and shadowy as in a dream! Had I realised instantly the full signification of the truth the silent lips before me had spoken to my heart, I must have lost sense and reason on the spot. With an indescribable feeling of dull agony—with a sudden sick loathing for the poor dead clay in my arms—I rose heavily from my knees, and placed it on a couch as far removed as possible from its living mother, covering the face with my handkerchief.

'Mary, this room is dark. Give me light and I can speak to you.'

Appalled and awe-stricken, I obeyed in silence. The calmness of her voice and manner, contrasted with the deadly pallor of her face and the bright fire in her eyes, filled me with a restless fear that almost took away the power of thought.

'Now, listen. You are sure he is not here?'

'Do you mean—my husband?'

'Whom else could I mean?'

'He is not here,' I said. 'He will not return. He cannot know of your presence in this house.'

'It would kill me,' she said, 'to see his face or hear his voice. I should die at his feet with utter shame if I met him face to face.'

She had moved from the fire and stood near to me. Her voice sounded full and rich as in the days of old. She spoke of shame, but her face gave her words the lie. There was no shame upon it. Only its former beauty, heightened and intensified. Only a

light upon it as the light might shine upon the face of an angel!

I took her hand and kissed it.

'Do not fear, dear friend,' I said, gently. 'Be seated. It is not fit that you should stand before me. Do not fear. All shall be as you wish. In the greatness of your heart you shall forgive me all the past. You are better, and purer, and nobler than I. I know that it is so, though I know not how I know it—unless it is that God Himself is teaching me. I am not worthy to touch the hem of your garment!'

She looked at me with a great tenderness in her face, and then sinking on her knees at my feet, buried her face in my dress. As she did so, I could control myself no longer —I burst into a passion of tears. She rose hastily.

'Why should you grieve?' she said, wonderingly. 'You have no cause for sorrow—you are happy—your husband is happy—all is bright for you!'

'It breaks my heart,' I said, 'to see you like this. Can I not help you? Oh, Marion, teach me what to do to show you I repent.'

'Repent?' she said. 'Repent of what? Why should you repent? I do not understand.'

'I fear it is partly through me that you are so unhappy. It hurts me to see you so.'

'Why should it hurt you? But you are wrong. It is well with me—I am not unhappy. I am accustomed to what you call care and trouble. It has not, it never had, power to crush me. Why should we quarrel with our inheritance? We cannot alter the consequences of our actions. They are inexorable. Oceans of tears would not turn them from their course. No repentance can stay them for a moment. No one is justified in feeling unhappy—for though we cannot but reap from the seed that we have sown—we can yet compel even the fruit of our mistakes to yield the seeds of nobler things.'

As she spoke she seated herself on a couch near. 'I have much to say to you, Mary,' she went on, 'and I am only idling your time away. Do you know,' she said, in a lower tone, 'that I feel strangely weak—I mean bodily, you know. The privations of the—the last two days have, I fear, affected me—I am faint.'

As I went hastily towards her, she fell back, senseless—and slowly trickling from her mouth was a long, bright stream of blood!

CHAPTER XLVI.

It was early morning, and my friend lay before me insensible. I knew now that she was dying. I had been told that no human skill could save her; that, in fact, her life must have been for many weeks slowly but surely ebbing away, and the events of the past few days had but hastened the end. Upon witnessing my terrible grief, the doctors had assured me that she would rally and recognise, and speak to me; that she might even live, and remain sensible also, for days; but that was all the hope they held out.

I had sat by her bed silent for many hours, watching for the least sign of consciousness. But she lay before me as dead, though I knew she yet lived. And still the light was on her face—the light that deepened and intensified its mournful beauty, the light

which shone upon it as the light might shine upon the face of an angel.

She moved and spoke at last. She unclosed her eyes and, meeting mine fixed upon her, recognised me instantly. But time and place were for the moment dim, and she knew me only as her old school-friend of the past.

'Tell Dr. Long, Mary, not to let Miss Grimshaw come to see me on any account. Papa will fetch me away directly I'm better, and you must stay with me till I'm well enough to be moved. If you don't tell him so,' she went on in a fainter tone, 'that terrible woman will be sure to come in, and tease, and question me.'

'I'll take care, dear, that she shall be kept away.'

Something in the tone of my voice seemed to rouse her. She half rose in the bed, and I put my arms hastily round her.

'Oh! Mary,' she said. 'What has happened to you? You are so beautiful—so

changed. You are no longer a tired-looking girl, but a lovely woman. I think——'

As she spoke the past came back to her, and she stopped suddenly, looking earnestly at me.

'I know now,' she said slowly. 'I thought, Mary, that I was in the infirmary at the college.'

She paused—and a strange, mysterious expression passed over her features.

'Mary,' she said, hoarsely, 'am I dying?'

'Oh! Marion—Not yet—Not yet.'

'Not yet? Ah! surely you would not deceive me? Alas! you cannot. Yet why should you wish to do so? It is best.'

She moved from me, and lay back upon the pillow silent, thinking earnestly. She had said that she would struggle against death, that she would die opposing it. She lay still, smiling calmly, as one smiles to meet and recognise a dearest friend!

'Where is my child, Mary?'

I could not answer. I only took her hand and kissed it.

'Ah! I remember even that now.—Ah! my sweet baby! My dear, dead child! Thank God—Thank God!'

She moved from me, and was silent for several minutes; then, turning gently back towards me:

'Can you not raise me,' she said, 'that I may sit up and speak to you? I know not how long I may be strong enough to talk. I feel that my time is very short. This envious time that hurries us so swiftly on! I want to tell you, Mary, how it all happened, and how you can help me, if indeed you will.'

'I will do all you wish,' I said, through my tears, raising her as she directed, and supporting her head with pillows. Then she took my hand in hers, and spoke on quietly.

. . . . .

'I did not love him, Mary. I only pitied him, and felt grieved for him. You know of whom I speak?'

'Alas!' I said, 'I know.'

'I felt deeply for him, because his nature seemed loving and affectionate, and everyone appeared to judge him harshly. No one was willing to believe any good of him. He saw this—I mean he saw I was sorry for, and sympathised with him, and whenever he had an opportunity he would come to me and, as he expressed it—tell me his troubles—complaining that even the woman he was about to marry seemed to regard him with mistrust, and that he believed I was the only one among us all who had any genuine faith in him—Heaven knows that even I had little—and yet, in time, my pity for him grew insensibly into the kind of affection which a sister might feel for some wayward and erring brother. I knew that he could not eventually be happy in his marriage. I knew that the wife he had chosen was in every way unsuited to him. But it was no business of mine. I used at one time to laugh at him when he complained to me; at

another to console him; oftener the former, I think.'

. . . . .

'The night before his marriage, he came round to my father's: "I am glad to find you alone," he said; "I want so much to speak to you."'

'"I am listening," I replied gravely.

'"I thought I'd like to talk with you for the last time," he went on. "You've always been kind and gentle to me, and I shall never forget you, though I'm not the good sort of fellow you take me for."

'He went on to tell me many things. How he had never, when he first grew to manhood, had any friends near him to advise him, and help him to keep from evil. "I've always been lonely in the world," he said; "no one has cared much for me. You are the only one, Miss Launceston, who ever seemed to take any interest in me for myself alone." On whatever subject he spoke, he came back always to this topic, telling me that

"had he known me years ago, he should certainly have turned out a different man, and should never have had the sin on his conscience that he had now."

'"You are making yourself out very bad," I said, half jesting, half in earnest. "What particular crime have you committed?"

'Then he laughed, and said "he only spoke against himself because he was low-spirited, and because it grieved him to think he might, perhaps, never see me again after the next day. He could not bear parting with people who had been kind to him. However, I'll turn over a new leaf now," he went on, "and try and be a different sort of fellow, you know, more worthy of your friendship, Miss Launceston, aud all that sort of thing, in case we should ever meet again."

'"Of course we shall meet again," I said.

'"I don't know that," he answered. "It is possible we may not. Perhaps more likely than you imagine. But you'll always think

kindly of me, will you not, whatever you may hear of me?"

'"Certainly I will," I answered. "I could not do otherwise."

'Then he began talking upon some other subject; but only to return to the former one before five minutes were over. He persisted in dwelling upon my supposed kindness to him, and his appreciation of it, and on his wish that he had met me earlier in his life. At length he bade me good-night, with a half-sorrowful, half-reckless air. I watched him down the garden-path, keeping myself hidden from him in case he should look back, for I would not flatter him by letting him know I was looking. He sauntered along in a careless way, whistling softly to himself, kicking up the little stones in his path, with his head bent down, and his hands in his pockets. I felt a great pity for him—a greater pity than I had ever felt for anyone before, whatever the misery or sin. I thought at first I would call him softly back from the

open window, and speak to him again; but, on second thoughts, I remained silent—and he went on his way. When I saw him the next morning his old manner had returned, and the conversation of the past night seemed only as a dream that puzzled me.'

. . . . .

'This is how I argued with myself, as I told you on that unhappy night. "This man loves me. And I? Well, certainly I do not return his love; but there is no reason why the respect and esteem I have for him should not in time grow into a stronger feeling. At all events," I said, "I will devote my life to making him happy, and in time my heart may feel for him the love which is now wanting." I could not make him desolate, Mary. Had I made up my mind to do so then, it seemed to me that the sound of his voice would haunt me forever. I thought of the sad words that other voice had said to me. "It is the want of love that has been my ruin. If I had had, years ago, some gentle-

hearted woman like yourself to care for me, I should not have been as I am now." And so I promised to be his wife, and he was happy. I believe he thought I loved him. At least, loved him in a quiet, trusting manner; and, yet, I had only told him that I cared for him more than for any other man I knew. And that was true, Mary, for I only felt a sort of sisterly interest in the other, and a great pity for him—the tenderest and truest pity.'

. . . . .

'When I left you in your room that night, in your bitter despair and pain, I felt broken-hearted. Your words were terrible to me. I could not forgive myself. "It is my selfishness that has blinded me," I said, "my cruel, wicked, selfishness. I ought to have seen that she loved him. I ought to have known it by a hundred signs which came before me. If I had not shut my eyes to everything but the gratification of the utter selfishness of my nature, I should have seen more clearly, and

have acted differently, but now there is no remedy! No remedy!" I said, "for I cannot break this man's heart by drawing back from my promise, nor, if I did, would it heal the wound in hers. There is no hope." I went into my room, and lay sleepless till daylight, with your pale, angry face always before me. . . .

'It was a bright fair morning. The sun was rising, as it is rising now, Mary, radiant and glorious. I rose and went to the window. "Perhaps the fresh air, and the soft beauty of the morning will calm me," I said. I bathed my face, took my hat—I had not removed my dress all night—and went gently downstairs, out at the front door into the road. I looked round. There was no one near. I walked on steadily for some distance, growing calmer every moment. Suddenly, as I turned an angle of the road, I heard a footstep. I looked up, and saw, instantly, that I was face to face with some one I knew —with *him*, Mary—with the one whom, in

my trouble, I had forgotten, and, for the time, had ceased to pity.'

She paused, but I could not speak, my face was buried in my hands.

'We were both so surprised for the moment,' she went on, 'that neither of us could utter a word. But at length he took my hand and asked me what had induced me to take such an early walk. "I heard," he said, "by the merest chance, what was to take place this morning, and I came down as soon as possible, by a late train last night, to get an opportunity of speaking to ——." You know whom I mean, Mary. "It is a turning point in my life," he said. "I know what I deserve of him; but he is generous, and on such a day as this is to him, a man will not merely forgive but pity. If he will only, for the sake of our former intimacy, help me round the corner, by just one word of recommendation, I shall be able to get on. I could not sleep. I have not slept all night; so strolled out to walk about till the people were

stirring, intending then to go to the house and ask for an interview. Miss Launceston," he said, "you know all, do you not? You know that my wife has left me?"

'"Of course I know it," I said, wondering how best to answer him.

'"And you despise me!" he went on. "I wonder that you will stay and speak to me here."

'"Why should I despise you?" I replied. "Indeed, if I could aid you in any way I would do it."

'"I want no aid nor assistance," he said, "at least from you. I only want you to believe what I say, Miss Launceston. As truly as I am standing before you now, when William Graeme gave me the papers, I took them in all truth and honesty, intending to execute his wishes, and it was not till many days after his death that the thought of acting as I did act crossed my mind."

'I looked at him with the most unmitigated astonishment.

'"What can you mean?" I said. "Are *you* not William Graeme?"

'"You told me that you *knew!*" he exclaimed, passionately.

'"I know that your wife has left you," I said. "I know no more."

'Then, Mary, he told me all. He told me his real name. He said, "I am—Louis Ernest Browne—the brother of your friend." —— It does not shock you, Mary, nor surprise you.'

For I had made no sign—I neither moved nor spoke.

'You do not speak, Mary. Then, you knew it!'

I dropped my hands and looked at her.

'I knew it yesterday,' I said, 'but not before. The lips of the dead opened, and told me.'

She put her face nearer to me with a troubled look.

'Go on, dear friend,' I said; 'I should

have said an angel spake to me; but my heart was hardened.'

. . . .

'When the first great shock was over,' she went on, 'he gave me his version of the story.

'He told me that he had started for England in a fit of repentance to find his mother and sister, induced to do so by some conversation he had had with one of his father's former friends whom he had met casually. The true William Graeme was his fellow-passenger on his voyage home, and the acquaintance commenced between them on board resulted in one of those sudden warm friendships so common among young people. Upon the death of this William Graeme through an accident when the ship had still three weeks to run, he conceived the idea of personating him, aided by papers and letters which his friend had entrusted to his care. For days, he said, he withstood the temptation; but the plot

at length from repeated contemplation seemed to him so easy to carry out, that he at last gave way. His object was to obtain some good appointment in England, and he had nearly succeeded in doing so when he met his future wife. His plans altered. He would marry her—and go abroad again—trusting to her fortune and good luck for his future. The first time he saw you, Mary, he recognised you instantly. He had seen you casually several times unknown to yourself, before you met him face to face in Mrs. Chanter's drawing-room. Though he had, immediately upon his arrival in England, disguised his appearance (he believed effectually), in order to avoid recognition by any former acquaintances, yet the sight of you filled him with a terrible dread. Then, to further his object of concealment, and to lessen the danger which an introduction to you personally would bring upon him, he caused a false notice of his death to be inserted in one of the leading periodicals,

which he purposed lending to me, thinking that being your friend, and, in all probability conversant with your affairs, I should not fail to show you the advertisement. At this juncture he met you by accident in the fields one afternoon, as you were coming to visit me. The sudden encounter unnerved him: and some remark you made induced him for the moment to believe that you recognised him. Upon reflection afterwards he concluded he was possibly mistaken in this—and in order to make all sure, beyond a doubt, decided upon following out his idea in regard to the paper; which accordingly he delivered to me as first intended, and I, as you doubtless remember, gave it to you. As you know, Mary, his schemes and foresight were crowned with success. He carried his point, and married the woman he desired; but retribution followed swiftly. When he and his wife were on their wedding tour, the latter recognised at some *table d'hôte* in Switzerland one of her old lovers,

to whom she had formerly been much attached. She had met him first when at school in France, but had lost sight of him for years. The acquaintance was at once resumed; and, at length, the lightness of her conduct with her former friend caused continued disruptions between herself and her husband. This man followed them to England, was detected in visiting the wife during the absence of her husband, and after a violent altercation was forbidden the house by the latter. He planned his revenge for this insult, as he termed it, and carried it out. For some reason, which was never discovered by his enemy, he had conceived the idea that that enemy was not the man he represented himself to be. He began, on the strength of this idea, to make enquiries—which, from all I have since heard, he must have pursued with the most amazing pertinacity—and, in due course, became cognisant of the whole history of him whom he desired to ruin. Without wasting time in

delay, he sent a detailed account of it to his wife's guardian. All was over now. The wretched girl, shallow to the last, maddened by despair, and wild for revenge on the husband who had betrayed her, fled with her former lover, leaving a few lines behind her for the man she had deserted, telling him that she would never willingly see his face again. "Since then," he said to me, "I have done nothing but repent the past, and curse the wretch who ruined me. Not that he really harmed me, except as regards my wife, for the explosion must have come sooner or later, and it was, after all, a relief to me when it did come. I don't trouble myself about anything now—I take things quietly—I dare say what I have come here for will be refused to me. It won't matter; I shall only get to the end a little faster—that's all!"

'My pity for him as he stood before me with the look of assumed indifference on his face—the look that I had so often seen

there—was so great, Mary, that I forgot all else. "I cannot help you," I said, "but yet, I would give my life to be able to do so."'

. . . .

'I don't know how it happened, Mary, but I felt such pity for him. It seemed to me that he was going fast to ruin, and I pitied him. I thought of you, his sister—and your agony—and the desolation I had brought upon your life. And, as I looked at him, it came into my mind like a flash of light—I had never thought of it before—it came into my mind that if the man I was about to marry could be brought suddenly to feel that I was utterly heartless, the blow would awake him from his dream, and would end his love for me by convincing him of my unworthiness. I thought—I felt certain—that if this result could be obtained, if I could succeed in destroying his affection for me, the end would be—as it is. I had no real reason for concluding that it would

be so, but I did so conclude—why I know not. Was it prevision? Was it merely a vague groundless idea? Who shall say? And, Mary, I pitied *him* so. He was my first thought. As he stood before me my pity grew so great, that it was almost like love. And then I thought again of you—and in a moment—I had yielded to my passionate impulse. For both your sakes I yielded. Almost before I knew that I was about to do so, I had hinted at the course which I am certain he himself would never have even dreamed of suggesting; from which, at first, upon realising my meaning, he—I give him credit for it—started as from some hideous monster. Then, in an instant, I saw the white pallor which my words had brought to his face and lips change to a dark hot flush, and I knew there was no feeling left in him but a wild reckless passion for the woman who was to have been a wife in a few short hours. I gave him my word that I would never forsake him;

and I kept it. He thought, Mary, that it was because I loved him; but, God pity me, it was not that. It was because of my conviction that the end would bring you happiness; and, because, in my pride and ignorance I imagined that the sacrifice of myself would be *his* salvation. Now, I have learned humility; but to me,' she said, with a ring of the old pride in her voice: 'it has been a bitter lesson.'

'Marion—ah, I cannot hurt you—but tell me this: where was your father? Had you no thought for him? You surely owed——'

'Oh! Mary, it is awful. I forgot him. I forgot his very existence—I never thought of him till—till it was too late——'

'Has he forgiven you?'

'I hope so,' she said, with a strange smile. 'If he knows—but who may tell what is known or unknown to those who are passed from among us?'

'Oh, Marion! is he dead?'

'He died from the effects of an accident,

the very day I was to have been married. Did you not know ?'

'Alas ! no,' I said ; 'but surely it is best.'

. . . .

'I had made a great mistake,' she went on, after a pause. 'It was not long before I discovered it. Those first few months were terrible. I soon found that the task I had set myself was not difficult—it was impossible. Mary, no power of woman's love can change the nature of a bad man. That is the lesson I learned with many bitter pangs and tears. "You are an angel, Marion," he would say ; "but even an angel cannot save *me*. Bad I was born, and bad I shall remain to the end of my days. There was a time, perhaps, when such a woman as you could have done something for me, but you are too late. I had no idea it would turn out so, or I would not have let you make the attempt. You *must* be an angel, Marion ; you are one ; but you can't change *me*." I cannot go through the details of the misery of that time.

He speculated and gambled. He wasted my mother's money ; then my father's, till there was little left. When my child was born, I made an effort to save that little ; but vainly. To the last he persisted in his endeavours to regain that which was lost, by risking portions of the remainder, and at length ventured all in one desperate stake, and—and—we were destitute. I thought the worst had come now ; but I was wrong. Returning one afternoon from my search for employment, I met him leaving the house with two policemen. In the agony of the moment I did not dare to ask his offence. I entreated him to speak to me, for he only looked at me sullenly. Then he kissed me, and begged me to find you at once and ask you to go to him. He said that a day or two previously he had seen your husband in the city, but had happily escaped his notice. From something he had heard he imagined that you and he were living apart, in which case he said there would be no danger of my meeting with

him, if I came to you. Mary, I think in spite of your marriage he lived in fear of your husband, for as he wrote down your address for me he told me he always knew his movements. If you look,' she said, 'in the pocket of my dress you will find a coin he gave to me to return to you. He said you would know, when you saw it, that he was indeed your brother. He begged me to entreat you to disclose the relationship at once to your husband. For your sake, he said, he might try to stay proceedings.'

As she spoke, I acted upon her words. I took from her dress, which lay near, the token she had mentioned. It was the florin I had so unwillingly yielded to my brother so many years before. There was my profile still distinctly marked upon it, as plainly as when it had left my keeping.

'Stay proceedings!' I exclaimed. 'Oh, Marion, where is he? What has he done?'

'Did I not tell you?' she said, faintly. 'He is—he is—in prison! What he has

done I know not. It is something in connection with your husband—I fancy,' she went on in a whisper, 'that he has—oh, Mary! I can hardly say it—but I think he has—forged his name——'

The words fell on my ears unheeded, for as she spoke I saw growing on her face a strange mysterious look that I knew too surely was the herald of death. But still the light was on it—a bright, unearthly light—as the light might shine upon the face of an angel!

'I walked here, Mary, for I had no money—I gave almost all I had to the woman who owned the room we occupied. She was kind and pitiful to me. She begged me to stay with her, and she would even find food for me and the child, till "better times should come," as she expressed it. But my one hope was to find you, and I would not linger a moment. She was poor, and I compelled her to take all that was due to her. It left me still a little to get bread on our

journey, and milk for the child. I kissed that good woman—surely God must love her—and started on my way. I had thought at one time of writing to you, telling you all, and entreating you to come to me; but the possibility that your husband might learn that I had done so deterred me. I imagined it would take me about thirty-six hours to reach your house; but I was wrong. It was two days and two nights before I even approached you. I walked nearly the whole of the first night, thinking I should be close to you the following evening. It was late on that evening when I found my mistake. I was still more than twenty miles from you. There was no place near where I could hope to obtain a lodging for the small sum I had left; so when I was utterly exhausted—with the cold more than with the exertion of walking—I crept into a barn, and, covering the child as warmly as I could, sank down by its side. We both slept. But, Mary, my baby never woke again. When I moved the

shawl in the morning and looked upon the quiet face—it was dead!

'I knew it had not died from exhaustion or hunger, for it had been well tended and fed the whole way; but Mary, it died of cold. For many hours as I carried it dead in my arms, my own limbs seemed benumbed. I could not recover from the effects of the severe frost and exposure of the previous night, but still I went on steadily. I had, at first, intended to wait about near your house (thinking that neither you nor he would recognise me, unless I first addressed you), and then speak to you in the street the first time I saw you out alone. But now my mind was altered: "I must go to her direct," I said, "whatever the consequences, for the sake of my dead child." At last, as evening drew on, though I had eaten in the morning, I became exhausted, and had to rest beneath a doorway, in my faintness. A kind woman gave me water—and I rose, and went on more bravely, for I

knew my journey was now nearly ended. Then again trembling and giddiness oppressed me, and I raised my eyes, and saw you near me.'

She paused, and turned her head towards me, and I clung to her and kissed her hands and lips in the bitterness of my remorse and grief. But she lay calm and still, as though pitying death had come to her aid.

'Mary,' she said at last, 'do not sorrow like this. It distresses me.'

I was silent now. She was right. I would put away my sorrow till no sorrow could distress her more. For I knew as I gazed upon her face that the time was very near—that the rest and peace were close at hand. Her lips moved, but no sound came.

'Speak, dearest,' I said. 'I am listening. Oh! my sister, tell me only once that you forgive me.'

The beautiful eyes were open now, and turned towards me, but their lustre was dimmed by the first breath of the great

destroyer. The shadow was over their brightness. The shadow that never fades away. I bent over her and kissed them.

'Why do you cry?" she said, as though she had not heard my words. 'Oh, dear Mary, why do you cry?'

I could not speak—I could only kiss her again—I could only kiss the fair eyes with the sweet beauty of the past still in them.

'If,' she said, 'there were cause for tears, I too should weep. But Mary, everything is right. When we cannot see this, it is because of our blindness. We are blinded by our own ignorance and conceit. Oh, Mary, this is death, and it comes to me like a friend!'

Still I could not answer. I could only lay my cheek against hers, and cling to her in agony.

'If you see him, Mary—— You *will* see him?'

'I will go to him, dearest.'

'Tell him from me that I did not grieve

at the last. Tell him, that for his sake I did not regret the past, and that God forgave the error and the wrong. If, indeed, there was wrong—I know not—— Tell him, Mary, that I loved him to the last—that I loved him dearly to the last moment of my life—— Now, I have done with earth. The darkness is past, and the new light is dawning. Speak to me of the brightness, Mary,—the brightness that is coming.'

She had said she would defy, and wrestle, and struggle with it. In the pride of her beauty, that had faded like a flower—she had spoken of victory even in defeat. Truly it was victory—complete and perfect victory, for the last great enemy was her friend.

'Say some soothing words to me, Mary. Something to draw my thoughts from the dreadful past. I want to forget it now. To forget it till the memory can hurt me no longer.'

. . . . .

'When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee—and through the floods,

they shall not overflow thee . . . . I, the Lord, will keep thee . . . . The shadow of a great rock in a weary land . . . .'

And the bright sun came streaming into the room, and the busy sounds of morning rose in the distance, like the hum of drowsy bees; but it shone on eyes that gave no welcome back; they fell on ears that would hear them never more. On the sweet face there was still a light—but not the light of this world—and, as the tear-dimmed, earth-blinded eyes looked wonderingly upon it, dazzled and bewildered with its glory, they saw it fade sadly into the shadow with which every face born of woman must one day be darkened—the shadow of the conquered enemy, whom men call Death.

. . . . .

'Oh, sweet sister,' I said, bending over the patient face, and bathing it with the tears it never more could feel. 'Oh, sweet dead eyes! Oh! silent lips! If one word could bring back the loved voice, the light, the

life, the beauty, I would utter it. Oh, sweet sister! I would take from you the new-born peace, but for one last word of pity and forgiveness, but for one last assurance of pity and of love.'

. . . . .

That night I slept the deep weary sleep of exhaustion. I rose early, and prayed by the side of the dead. And as I prayed I heard my husband's voice and his step on the stairs. I was in his arms—forgetful of all but him, wild with passionate joy, and the certainty of the recovered love, which, I had feared was dead for ever. Then, with sudden memory, I released myself from his clinging arms, and drawing him quietly into the little room where we had last parted—with an awful cry I fell on my knees at his feet and—told him all.

The story was ended. And God sent my punishment. Even between my broken sentences my husband had not uttered a sound, though I saw that he controlled him-

self with a mighty effort. But as my voice sank in the last words, he broke from my grasp with such a terrible half-stifled cry of agony, that I fell back in fear and horror.

'And it was for you,' he said, 'that she renounced me! It was for your sake that she deserted me! If it had not been for *you*, she would—— Oh, God!' he said, 'she would now have been my wife. It was for your sake and for mine—for me and for you—blind selfish fools, who were not worthy even to stand in her presence, that she gave up all that a woman holds dear! Oh, God! That I can hear it and live! Keep back,' he cried, as, staggering to my feet, I went towards him. 'Keep back—or—or I shall murder you.'

He hurried from me with his face hidden. Forgetting all but the fierce pain of the moment, I hastily followed. The door was shut, but I opened it and entered the room. And there, by the death-bed of his early love—dead to her presence, and worse than

dead to it, indifferent to and heedless of it —the wife saw her husband kneeling, clinging to the pale dead form, resting his head on the cold bosom, weeping aloud in the passionate anguish of a strong man's grief, shedding the burning tears that are wrung from the bursting heart like drops of blood!

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE most unhappy week of my life passed away at last, and when it was ended it seemed to me like a dream. Every waking hour of it was fraught to me with such misery that I look back upon it now as a kind of barrier in my life, a dark spot of horror that divides my conscious existence into two parts —the life that went before it, and the life that has come after.

All the sad and mournful details of the necessary enquiry into the death of my friend were over. I had seen her passive face for the last time, hardly realising, as I looked on its calm placid stillness, that it would indeed never more wake into the life and beauty of the past. I had sat quietly in my room, with my half-frightened child in my

arms, while my husband and his old friend, Dr. Long, went the last earthly journey with the companion of my youth; and the blinds of the house were drawn up again, and my baby prattled and chattered as of old with no half-whispered tones to check her mirth. Everyday life had returned. There was nothing to remind me of the agony of the past few days, nothing to keep before me that an earthquake had shaken my existence but unfailing memory, and the knowledge of the duty that lay before me in the immediate future. That duty was to visit my unhappy brother.

He was in prison, though I was not then cognisant of the accusation under which he laboured. To this day I am ignorant of the details of the crime of which he was eventually convicted, though I believe it consisted in endeavouring to obtain a large amount of money by forging the signature of my husband. I shrank from visiting him, though under a solemn promise to my dead friend to

do so. It was not till I had been repeatedly urged by my husband to fulfil my commission that I at length agreed to delay the duty no longer.

'Teach me what to say to him,' I pleaded. 'I know not how to tell him what I have to tell.'

'"Say," Mary?' he repeated. 'Teach you what to say to him? *I* cannot teach you. Say whatever is in your heart, whatever it is given you to say at the time. With regard to myself,' he went on slowly, 'with regard to myself—God forbid that I should wilfully harm him, but I cannot help him. Let him understand that distinctly. Had he injured me less there might have been more room for resentment in my heart; or,' he added, hesitatingly, 'even for forgiveness—I know not. But, in any case, I will not help him, and I would not harm him.' And so I started on my journey.

My dear husband! He was the same to me now as in the first days of our married

life. After the one great outburst of agony, after the utterance of the first and last at once hasty and angry words I have ever heard from his lips—words that, at the time, seared my heart as with fire, and that, even now, on any sudden recollection of them strike me with a quick pang that no time has lessened—his manner to me changed instantly and entirely—he was again the husband of my love, my kind and tender friend; striving, I solemnly believe, to undo the impression which his hurried passionate words had made upon me. In every loving way he consoled and comforted me in my distress; never showing, after the first shock was over, that the knowledge of the sad events which had happened pained him to any greater degree than it would have pained any mere outside observer. He had given simple and plain directions as to the arrangement of all necessary business connected with the unhappy circumstances in which he had found himself placed, and had taken in-

finite trouble to save me pain and suffering in the matter. Oh, my dear husband! It was not till long afterwards that I seemed thoroughly to realise all your goodness in this, all the unselfishness you displayed, all the undeserved tenderness and kindness you lavished upon me. But at times, now, I think of it. At times, now, I look upon your peaceful face, beautiful to me from the perfect content, even more from the benevolence of its expression; and as I look upon it I realise somewhat of the meaning of those strange sacred words, 'The kingdom of heaven is within you.'

As I took my way to my brother I pondered as to the words I should say to him. I framed in my mind the style of my address, and even decided upon many sentences I would utter, filling in, in imagination, the pauses in my speech with the hearer's exclamations of dismay and despair when he should learn how his gentle messenger had fared, and that he would never see her face

again. I pictured to myself the whole scene, and am ashamed to confess now, in my maturer years, that even then no slightest sense of pity was mingled with my feelings for my only brother. I failed to see that I ought to have some commiseration for him. I was utterly blind to the fact that he was infinitely more worthy of pity than those whom he had so grievously injured. I forgot that their sufferings were either ended or mitigated, while his were but begun.

When I had arrived at my destination I was shown without delay into the presence of the unhappy prisoner, and the door of the small obscure room was closed upon me. I looked round, but at first could see nothing; the darkness of the interior, after my eyes had been accustomed to the broader light outside, blinding me for a moment. Gradually a black shadow in the distance grew into the semblance of a human being. It was my brother. And yet, as I looked closer,

not my brother, only a faded, dreadful likeness of the William Graeme of the past.

I had stood for some seconds motionless and silent before I had even realised he was near me, and when I recognised him fully, the dazed, still look on his face, as he kept his eyes steadily fixed on me, struck me dumb. All my presence of mind left me instantly, all my grand speeches were forgotten in a moment. I felt sick and faint, and should have fallen to the ground had not a seat been near into which I sank helpless.

As I did so something of the astonishment or mist seemed to clear from the face opposite to me. The figure advanced closer to me, and I felt my brother's hand clasp my arm roughly.

'Why are *you* here?' he said, hurriedly. 'Drop this foolery and tell me. What have you come for?'

Probably this proceeding of my companion roused me more effectually than any other means at hand would have done.

The gap that years and strange events had made was bridged over in a moment. It was all so like some long-past scene in my childhood when my dominant brother had assumed the mastery over me, according to his invariable custom even in our most trifling disputes, that for the first time during our interview I *knew* him—for the first time I realised that it was indeed the Louis of old. This realisation roused in me immediately the spirit with which I had always met his attempts at coercing me. I sat upright in the chair, and looked full at him.

'Take your hand from my arm instantly,' I said, 'or I will not speak a word. I am a grown woman now, and you have no power over me. If you are rough to me you will suffer for it.'

He loosened his grasp as I spoke, and at length released me entirely, but I would not utter another sound. I waited for him to speak again, which he did after looking at me for a moment, with a slight return

of the strange, dazed look growing on his face.

'Now, tell me please,' he said, 'why is *she* not here? Has she done as I told her?'

'Yes. She came to me and asked me to help you. But, Louis, I cannot help you. I have come here to tell you so. She begged——'

'Ah,' he interrupted, 'I see. She is ashamed to come. She's afraid to come. She dare not tell me to my face that she has not the wit to be able to persuade my own sister to save me from penal servitude, so she sends you instead. No doubt you enjoy the commission. You had always a bad, revengeful nature from a child.'

I was so staggered by this latter statement that I simply stared at him without replying.

'Do you know what penal servitude means, you—you fiend,' he went on, 'that you can without hesitation consign your own brother to such a fate? But I scorn to beg of you. If *she* has not prevailed, *I* will not

go down on my knees to you. I will take my own course and escape you yet. As you refuse to plead my cause with your precious husband, I will do it myself. There are one or two screws I can turn yet, and I'll begin at them without delay; though, for your own sake, I should have advised you to bring your influence to bear, and earn my silence. As it is, things will be worse for you, and for him, and for her too, than ever they have been yet; and all I can say is, that each one of you will be rightly served.'

'What do you mean,' I exclaimed, indignantly.

'That's *my* business. You will not have to wait long to see. I don't know,' he went on, after a pause, 'what possible motive you could have had in paying me this visit, unless it was to satisfy a morbid curiosity; a few lines would have answered your avowed purpose just as well as giving yourself the expense and trouble of a journey, besides sparing me annoyance. Now, I think you

had better go. Where is Marion? You have, at least, had the charity to look after her, I suppose.'

'She is dead,' I said.

In the passion of the moment, I knew no pity. The blank stupor that grew upon his face till it looked like a face carved in stone, hardly seemed strange to me. The white lips that tried to utter words that their powerlessness made dumb, I simply looked upon with a quick sense of triumph. But speech came at last.

'You—are—lying,' he said.

'I am not,' I went on, calmly, without a trace of passion in my voice. 'The child died in the open street, in her arms, of exposure and exhaustion from want of proper nourishment, and she herself, the day after her arrival at my house, died of rapid decline, accelerated by lack of the comforts necessary to her state of health. I say nothing in the matter, but that was the verdict of the coroner's jury. Now I will obey your

wishes, and go. . . . Oh! Louis,' I cried suddenly. Oh! my poor brother! God pity us both!'

I did not leave him then. I waited till I was compelled to go. Then I bade him farewell with a heart full of sorrow, and more human in its agitation than it had been for many days.

It is useless to dwell on this portion of my story. My just husband heard my entreaties, and the expression of my changed mood towards my brother with a calm grave face, that seemed to me, in itself, a more terrible answer to my request than the most angry refusal could have appeared at the moment.

'Tell me,' I said, 'that you will do all in your power to stay his punishment. He says you can prevent the prosecution, if you will. You *must* do it, for my sake. You *must* do it to prove to me that you indeed love me.'

'Listen, Mary,' he answered, 'and let

what I say content you, for I cannot say otherwise, and any renewal of this subject can have no other ending than it will have now. Your brother is misinformed. I cannot stay the course of justice. The matter is out of my hands. If I could do so, for your sake, though for no other reason, I hope I should. But it is impossible. Understand fully—It is simply impossible. So let it rest. And believe me in this, that whatever may be the future of your brother, it will be better for him to taste the bitter fruit of wrong-doing in his youth, than in his later years. We can help him when his punishment is over.'

'But he is sorry now. He would never sin again.'

'Poor child!' he said, stroking my hair fondly; 'can you really think so? Unfortunately for your theory, *I* am so thoroughly convinced that if he now escaped justice he would not only sin again, but that speedily, that that conviction causes me even to re-

joice that it is out of my power to help him to freedom.'

. . . . .

I saw my brother only once again. He was sentenced to a long term of imprisonment, and it was after his condemnation that I visited him. I cannot, alas! take upon me to say that he was penitent; but his mood was less bitter than at our former interview, and I felt there was room for hope that his future might be innocent of fresh crime.

'Good-bye, Mary,' he said to me; 'I shall see you again some day, no doubt. Don't fret. I know you have done all you can for me, and that's little enough, goodness knows. I don't bear your husband any grudge, and I suppose it's all been my own fault. I'd better have been straightforward after all. It pays better in the long run.'

And so we parted.

. . . . .

It is a calm still summer's evening two

years later. My husband is seated near me reading, and our two little children are playing close by; the elder protecting her sister Marion as she occasionally overbalances herself on the floor. I am looking steadily towards the pleasant prospect the room commands through the open glass doors; but I see nothing, for my heart is full of sad thoughts which take away all consciousness of external things. I have not had my usual monthly letter from my poor prisoner, and I am wondering for the hundredth time whether he is ill or simply negligent, fearing the former as he has never before missed an opportunity of writing to me. Escaping from my reverie, I look round suddenly and see my husband's eyes fixed on me with a sad grave expression. I know instantly and intuitively that his thoughts are as mine.

'Is it not strange?' I say. 'Do you think he is ill?'

The gravity of his face seems to deepen as I look at him. He rises from his seat and

comes near to me, placing his arm round me. Then he speaks in a calm, quiet tone—

'Can you bear a shock, my darling?' he says. 'When you think it through, it will not pain you. God is very merciful, and all is for the best. I received this last evening.'

He has taken a letter from his pocket, and is placing it in my hand. My fingers close tremblingly upon it; and in it I read that my brother is dead, suddenly and unexpectedly—dying, as his mother had died, without warning or preparation of any kind. The letter was from the chaplain of the gaol to my husband; and when I had finished reading it, I could but echo the words of the latter—'God is very merciful; all is for the best.' For at the eleventh hour the eyes of my poor lost brother had been opened, and at that moment of grace God had taken him.

. . . . .

An hour or two later we take our usual evening walk. We visit Marion's grave, taking with us a few choice flowers to place

upon it, according to our weekly custom in the summer time. Our elder little girl is with us, and seeing my tears fall as I lay my offering on the tomb, she looks at me with a quaint surprise.

'What 'oo cry for to-night, Mamma dear? Isn't poor Aunt Mare-on 'appy any longer?'

'Yes, my lamb,' I answer, 'she is very, very happy; and papa, and mamma, and little Mary will see her one day, and be as happy as she is.'

'And 'ickle Mare-on, too?'

'And little Marion, too.'

And, in the stillness of the summer night, the father, mother, and child walk home together.

THE END.

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